

# In Praise of Unsung Heroes

## Local Government Officials Learning the Power of Green Purchasing

By Scot Case

Ask Shirli Axelrod if she considers herself an environmental hero, and chances are she'll just start laughing. Despite her modesty, Axelrod, a resource planner for the city of Seattle, is an important environmental champion. Shirli and state and local purchasing officials across the country like her are at the leading edge of a movement that is beginning to build a market for environmentally friendly products while reducing toxic waste, protecting worker health and even saving taxpayers money in the process. In the dictionary, under the phrase "unsung hero" is Shirli's picture.

Armed with annual budgets for goods and services totaling \$385 billion, Seattle and other state and local governments throughout the nation represent the single largest—and still largely untapped—force for supporting green markets and reducing the damage done to the environment by a range of manufacturing processes and consumer products. These government purchasing teams are responsible for buying the goods and services necessary to keep city, county and state governments running nationwide. They buy and negotiate contracts for office supplies like paper, furniture, and computers; cleaning, pest control, and lawn maintenance services; and larger and more expensive purchases for products like garbage trucks, city buses or even new government buildings.

Fueled by a strong environmental ethic and desire to improve government purchasing standards, increasing numbers of procurement officers and local elected officials are now insisting on environmental standards like recycled-content percentages, low toxicity requirements, energy- and water-efficiency specifications, and other environmental attributes designed to reduce harm to human health and the environment. And the positive

effects are beginning to be felt.

For instance, in Seattle, Shirli Axelrod and others are working to decrease the environmental impact of the 8,000 to 9,000 new computers the city buys every three or four years. This is particularly important because PCs are typically manufactured with and contain a variety of hazardous materials, including lead, cadmium, mercury, chlorinated solvents and flame-retardants. To take just one example, in creating a single six-inch silicon wafer from which computer chips are cut, the manufacturer generates some very unhealthy byproducts, including 25 pounds of sodium hydroxide, 2,840 gallons of waste water and 7 pounds of hazardous waste!

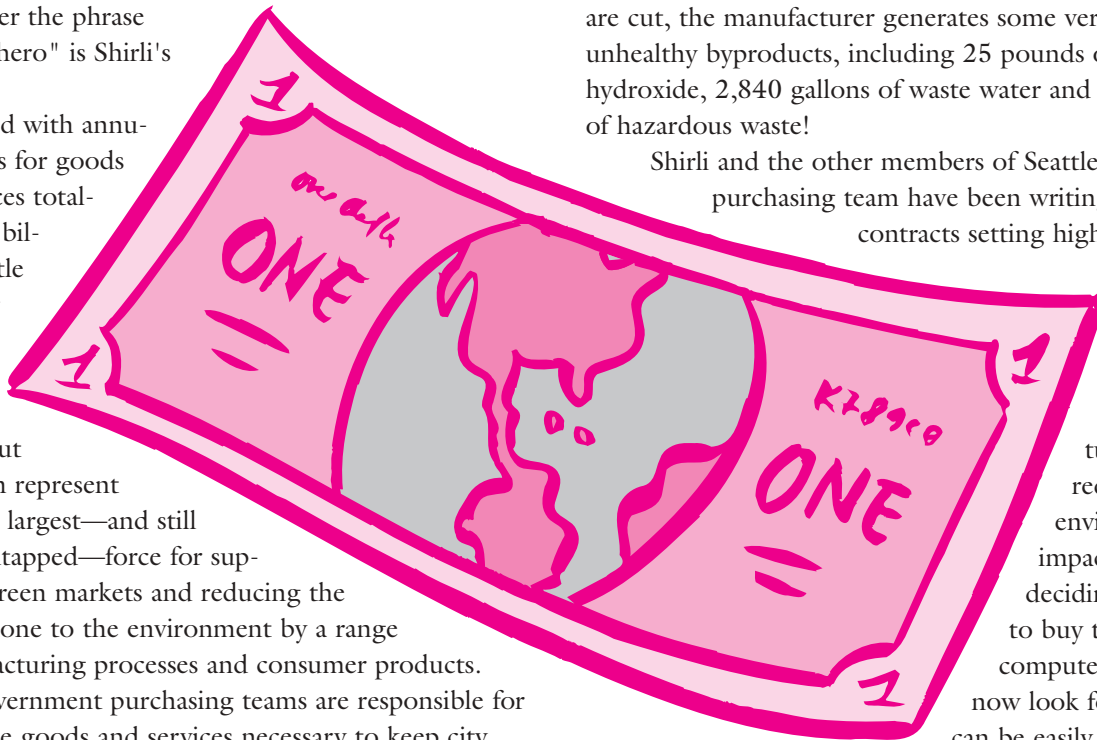
Shirli and the other members of Seattle's green purchasing team have been writing up new contracts setting higher stan-

dards that encourage computer manufacturers to reduce these environmental impacts. When deciding where to buy the city's computers, they now look for PCs that can be easily upgraded

and recycled, are more energy-efficient, are shipped with minimal packaging, and which contain fewer hazardous materials. While cost and performance remain high on the list of priorities, in the increasingly competitive computer market, environmental performance could determine who receives Seattle's multi-million dollar contract.

Recently, the Center has begun sharing Seattle's success stories and many other innovative "green purchasing" strategies with government purchasers across the country. We've begun leveraging the enormous buying power of state and local governments to shift markets towards more environmentally preferable goods

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and services. And, as ever-larger numbers of government purchasers begin demanding environmentally friendly products, these products will become more available and affordable for the rest of us.

## **The Finer Points of Green Purchasing**

“Environmentally preferable purchasing” is one way of factoring in the environmental performance of goods and services together with traditional price and performance concerns when making a purchasing choice. While there are several definitions, many state and local governments use one adopted by the Federal government in a 1993 Presidential executive order. At that time, President Clinton’s order defined environmentally preferable products as “... products or services that have

a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared with competing products or services that serve the same purpose. This comparison may consider raw materials acquisition, production, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, reuse, operation, maintenance, or disposal of the product or service.”

Former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge signed a similar order in 1998 requiring the

Pennsylvania government to purchase “environmentally friendly commodities and services [that] avoid the use of toxics, minimize use of virgin materials and energy in their production, have a long, useful life, and can be recycled afterwards.” Many other local governments have adopted related measures in a series of executive orders, statutes, and written policies in Boulder, Colorado; Cincinnati, Ohio; Illinois; Jackson County and Kansas City, Missouri; King County and Seattle, Washington; and Washoe County, Nevada, among others.

## **Environmental Purchasing In Action**

State and local governments are increasingly including environmental considerations in a wide variety of purchases. A few examples....

### **Cleaning Products and Services**

A large number of state and local governments are addressing the human health and environmental concerns associated with their cleaning product purchases.

Many traditional cleaning products contain chemicals linked to cancer, reproductive disorders, respiratory ailments, eye and skin irritation, and other health issues. They can also include ozone-depleting substances, toxic materials, and chemicals that accumulate in the environment with harmful consequences.

Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Washington, along with numerous municipal and county governments, have adopted environmental standards for their cleaning product purchases. Many of these standards are based on work initiated by the City of Santa Monica, California, which currently considers 18 environmental objectives before buying cleaning products or services. Santa Monica prohibits carcinogens, aerosols, ozone-depleting chemicals, and specific hazardous chemicals. It also established strict standards for volatile organic compound (VOC) content and biodegradability and evaluates the presence of dyes, fragrances, product packaging, and water quality threats. The city estimates its cleaning product purchases have eliminated 3,200 pounds of hazardous materials annually and saved approximately 5 percent on annual cleaning expenses.

### **Switching to Green Energy**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the American electric power industry produced 1.1 billion pounds of toxic emissions in 1998, 15 percent of all U.S. toxic emissions. Seeking to reduce the environmental impacts of electricity generation, some state and local governments are buying “green” power, derived from renewable resources. Pennsylvania, for example, bought 37,500 megawatt hours (MWh) of green electricity, 5 percent of its total electricity purchases, in 2000. It also recently announced that it will buy 50,000 MWh of green electricity for 2002 and 2003.

Santa Monica is buying 100 percent renewable electricity for all of the city’s facilities. It expects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 13,672 tons annually. Chicago, Illinois, and 47 other nearby governments agreed to buy 400 MWh of power as a group to save money and required that 80 MWh (20 percent of the total purchase) must be from clean, renewable sources such as solar or wind energy. Santa Barbara and Oakland, California, are also buying green power.

### **Integrated Pest Management Services**

Every year in the United States, more than 4.5 billion pounds of chemicals are used to control unwanted

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Ohio has contracts  
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seaweed, old U.S.  
currency, denim,  
banana skins,  
tobacco leaves and  
coffee bean shells

insects, rodents, and weeds. Switching to an integrated pest management (IPM) approach is an increasingly popular method of significantly reducing chemical volumes and toxicities. IPM programs are currently being implemented in Connecticut; Massachusetts; Cape May County, New Jersey; Chatham County, North Carolina; Kansas City, Missouri; King County, Wash-

ington; Portland, Oregon; Santa Monica, California; Seattle, Washington; and San Francisco, California.

San Francisco has one of the most aggressive IPM programs in the country. It includes a full-time citywide IPM coordinator and a list of less hazardous pesticides that can only be used if non-chemical approaches fail. Pesticides not appearing on the list can only be used in extreme cases and require a one-time exemption from the city's IPM coordinator. The city's Recreation and Parks Department, which is responsible for 200 facilities covering 3,000 acres, was formerly the city's largest chemical user. After adopting the IPM approach, the department reduced its pesticide use by 60 percent and completely eliminated the use of organophosphates and other highly toxic pesticides.

#### Paper

Paper is one of the most visible ways for state and local governments to demonstrate an environmental commitment, because government agencies are huge paper consumers. Many state and local governments use recycled-content paper and note that fact on the bottom of their printed publications. More recently, several state and local governments are looking beyond recycled-content and incorporating other environmental features such as chlorine-free and "tree-free" paper.

As directed by Governor Howard Dean in 1996, Vermont uses process chlorine-free copy paper for all state business. Oakland, California, and Portland, Oregon, are also buying chlorine-free paper, and Minnesota and Indiana both promote its use to state agencies. All paper used by Massachusetts contains at least 30 percent post-consumer content, but the state also makes papers containing 50 and 100 percent post-consumer content and tree-free papers made from kenaf and bamboo available under state contract. Ohio has contracts for tree-free papers made from seaweed, old U.S. currency, denim, banana skins, tobacco leaves, and coffee bean shells.

Feel yet like rushing out and giving a big hug (or lending a hand) to your local or state purchasing team? Because, as unsung and unlikely as these buttoned-down heroes may be, Shirli and others like her truly do hold one of the keys to unlocking the full potential of America's green marketplace and to our shared, sustainable future. Simply by redirecting purchasing dollars, communities across the nation are saving forests, reducing global warming and improving human health.

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## Even Heroes Need Help

The Center's Procurement Strategies Program is providing much-needed support to state and local governments in coordinating their environmental purchasing activities. We sponsor bi-monthly conference calls for government officials to discuss ways to "green" their purchases. Our most recent call pulled in more than 200 eager participants. We are also co-sponsoring a green purchasing conference for government and private sector purchasers April 22 to 25, 2002, in Philadelphia at the Sheraton Rittenhouse, one of the greenest hotels in the United States. You can learn more about these and other green purchasing projects at [www.newdream.org/procure](http://www.newdream.org/procure).

You can help by writing letters to the editors of your local press endorsing environmentally preferable purchasing as an important market-based solution to environmental challenges. You can also write your local government purchasing officials and encourage them to learn more about green purchasing. Contact your elected officials at the city, county or state level and encourage them to mandate environmentally responsible procurement. To learn more about model policies, go to [www.newdream.org/procure/policy](http://www.newdream.org/procure/policy). For a useful list of state purchasing officials just click over to the Web site of the National Association of State Purchasing Officials at [www.naspo.org/directory](http://www.naspo.org/directory). And, if you can spare the time and the stamp, we would love to receive a copy of your advocacy efforts!

Finally, the Center wishes to express appreciation to the following foundations for their support of our Procurement Strategies Program:

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