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Alameda County uses its dollars to go green



Alameda County has been working on green purchasing initiatives, like solar panels, for over a decade. Photo by Living Off Grid via Flickr Creative Commons.

By: [Dara Kerr](#) | June 1, 2011 – 12:57 pm

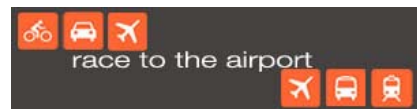
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Most people may not know that the carpets in Alameda County's General Services Agency's office in downtown Oakland are partially made from shredded recycled plastic bottles. They also may not know that over 25 percent the power used at the [Santa Rita jail](#) comes from solar panels. These, along with other energy efficient and recycled materials projects, are part of Alameda County's green purchasing policy. The idea is for the county to buy and use as many green products as possible in order to save water and energy and reduce waste.

In May, after working on green purchasing initiatives for over a decade, the [Alameda County Board of Supervisors](#) adopted a comprehensive new policy that incorporates the work they've already done and looks ahead to making the county even more eco-friendly in the future.

With over 10,000 employees and dozens of buildings, vehicles, agencies and services—such as jails, courthouses and garbage pick-up—the county is a huge consumer of energy and materials. Decisions officials make about what is purchased can have a significant environmental impact. Also,



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decisions the Board of Supervisors makes in green purchasing can help set the pace for how local governments, businesses and individuals also buy and reuse materials.

"We are correcting the wrong that for years and years has been going into effect in this country and the world," says Alameda County Board of Supervisors Vice President Keith Carson. Being "acutely mindful of the environment," he says, has saved money for the county's taxpayers, created and supported new local businesses and improved the health of residents.

Within the [Alameda County Climate Action Plan for Government Services and Operations](#), which the county adopted in May, the county has agreed to 16 "climate commitments." One of these commitments is the [green purchasing policy](#). This new policy hones in on four key components: prioritizing waste reduction, purchasing products with recycled content, purchasing products that meet other environmental criteria such as energy and water conservation, and buying materials from environmentally-sensitive manufacturers.

For the most part, the green products are in county offices and buildings and include whatever county employees use in their daily work. "It's work-related products," Carson says. "Toners, printers, computer applications, anything that would be used in a normal business setting." For example, he says that for the past few years the county has been buying products in which the packaging does not use Styrofoam, paper products that are biodegradable and not colorized, and orders on supplies have been coordinated between cities to reduce fuel use in transportation. "This is an emerging way of growing and operating," he says.

Using products made by eco-sensitive manufacturers helps county agencies identify what exactly is a green product and also sends a consistent message to the marketplace. "By virtue of our buying power, which is a total of \$20 million, we can help influence the market," says Aki Nakao, Director of [General Services for Alameda County](#), adding that everything from toilet paper to paper towels to cleaning chemicals and furniture in county-run buildings is environmentally friendly.

Nakao explains that environmental products get cheaper as demand increases, and that big buyers like the county are helping to drive down prices for everyone. "Before, recycled paper was much more expensive than virgin but with increased usage that price has come down to almost equal," Nakao says. "It's the response from manufacturers."

The whole idea of a green purchasing policy began in Alameda County around 2000. "This is when we started to cobble together all the initial things that were happening," says Nakao. County officials started with improving energy efficiency, and were particularly interested in solar projects. For example the solar panels that line the roof of Santa Rita jail were first installed in 2001 and then were expanded in 2002. The panels cover about three acres of the jail's roof—at the time they were installed, this was the fourth-largest solar photovoltaic system in the world.

"That was the genesis of the program," says Nakao. "As we moved on, we moved to chemical ordinances, then onto green products and now we are moving into transportation to reduce greenhouse gas."

The county has also tackled big multi-use projects such as the [Juvenile Justice Center](#) in San Leandro. When this center opened in 2007 it was the first U.S. Green Building Council LEED Gold-rated facility of its kind, which is a high-rating standard for green building design. In addition to solar panels that provide 60 percent the building's electricity, it has waterless urinals, water-efficient plumbing and water reducing landscaping, which saves over 7 million gallons of water per year. The design of the building maximizes natural light and it was built with recycled materials and decorated with carpets and furniture made with recycled goods. It also has a full green cleaning program, which means that the janitorial staff uses eco-friendly cleaning supplies and microfiber mops.

Green vehicles are another component to the county's policy, Nakao says. County employees have been using hybrid cars since the early 2000s but now the county is also looking at also buying electric and bio-diesel vehicles to further reduce greenhouse gases. "Right now, we have four vehicles that are run on vegetable oil," says Nakao. "It's the leftover frying oil that tacos and chow mein are made from and they're running just fine."

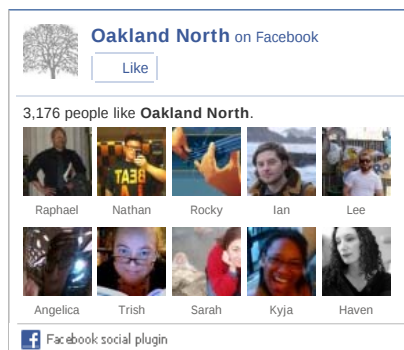
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Nakao explains that the county's efforts are meant to be broad and tackle many kinds of energy efficiency programs. "It's been a holistic approach to maintain a green program," Nakao says. "We have a fairly wide spectrum to reduce our dependency on oil."

Carson points out that going green saves local tax payers hundreds of thousands of dollars each year by having to spend less on water, electricity and fuel that would otherwise be consumed by county agencies. "While we are a government agency, we must look at the cost efficient ways we do business," says Carson. "Construction projects and solar energy initially are more expensive, but the long-term use of them may be cost-saving."

Other benefits of the policy, he says, are the creation of green jobs, such as the growth of the solar industry, and support for local businesses, such as recycling and reuse centers like the [East Bay Depot For Creative Reuse](#) in Oakland, which sells discarded goods at a low cost. Additionally, having less pollution in the air improves the health of Alameda County residents, he says. Nakao agrees, saying, "The overall objective is create a healthy living environment and the general well being of the residents."

The goal of adopting the Alameda County Climate Action Plan in May was to work towards reducing the county's greenhouse gases 20 percent by 2015. By working with county's department heads along with elected officials from all of the county's cities, Carson believes this goal can be met. "We are on the forefront of the environmental movement," he says. "We've been on the leading edge of this." (Oakland has its own [climate action plan](#) to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions 36 percent by 2020.)

Alameda County has been a national green leader since it began working on sustainable initiatives and has won several awards for its environmental stewardship. Just last week, Alameda County's auto fleet was named as one of the top 100 for using green transportation by *Government Fleet* magazine; and, in the past, it has received two Governor's Environmental and Economic Leadership Awards along with [several other awards](#) from the Environmental Protection Agency and other conservation organizations.

"We are a just-in-time generation, we are a just-in-time society," says Carson. "We [at the county] are trying to see how we can have less of an impact on the environment."

For more information about the county's green purchasing policy and links to resources residents can use at home visit <http://www.acgov.org/sustain/what/purchasing/>.

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