



## **Ithaca Passes Environmentally-Preferable Purchasing Policy**

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At Common Council's February meeting, a policy making it possible for the city to purchase environmentally preferable or green options for items ranging from cleaning supplies to equipment was passed unanimously. An amendment to the city's purchasing policy and an amendment to the municipal code to aid the change were also passed unanimously.

Dennise Belmaker, the city's sustainability planner, has been working towards creating a comprehensive "green" policy for the city for the last six months, with the fine tuning of the policy occurring in the last three months with the help of the controller and city attorney's office.

"The idea of amending the policy came as a response to the interest and independent efforts of many city staff that were looking for more environmentally friendly and sustainable alternatives," explained Belmaker, "What I found was a lack of comprehensive city-wide guidelines or policies to back up such efforts. There were different people trying already to look within their budget to see if they could purchase recycled content materials and even engineering has been trying to for all of their projects keep sustainability in mind. But there was just a lack of something inclusive and comprehensive on a city-wide level."

Belmaker said that in her research she found that these kinds of policies for environmentally preferable - or green purchasing - are becoming a standard of environmental responsibility in cities, towns, and counties. The New York State Office of Government Services, according to Belmaker, has also been doing a lot more to offer environmentally friendly options, meaning that a lot of things purchased through state contracts are already being looked at at the state level.

"It's really recognizing the city's responsibility in what the city can do in terms of minimizing health risks to city staff and residents, minimizing the city's contribution to global climate change, improving air quality, protecting the quality of ground and surface water, and minimizing the city's consumption of resources," Belmaker said of the city's policy, "It's also promoting and supporting more sustainable purchasing practices."

The policy and amendments make changes to the city's responsibility guidelines for choosing the lowest responsible bidder in a bidding process. The changes to the definition of what constitutes a responsible bidder follow changes made by the city in September 2011 when the city's sweat-shop free policy was passed.

"In sweat-shop free they added that responsible cannot be someone who exploits employees," explained Belmaker, "So one of the resolutions was an ordinance to amend the municipal code to include language of what is responsible in terms of environmentally preferable purchasing for the city. So the only

difference that it makes is that now there are additional guiding principles to what is a responsible supplier or bidder."

The policy also promotes and encourages the use of existing certifications and standards when environmentally responsible products are being chosen.

"It does give guidelines on how to, within the existing laws and regulations for purchasing, always be able to choose the more responsible option," said Belmaker, "The greener option."

For products that do not require a bidding process, like for office supplies, Belmaker explained, the switch is easier. The policy gives a price preference for environmentally preferable options. For recycled material there is a price preference of 10 percent. Belmaker gave the example that if the city was looking at recycled content copying paper, and the recycled paper was a dollar more than the non-recycled, that in the past, the city's policy would have required the choice of the lower cost option. But now, if it falls within the 10% price preference, the recycled option could be chosen.

"It doesn't mean that the city will start purchasing things for much higher price or increase its spending just because of this policy," said Belmaker. The City Controller's Office, which is in charge of most of the city's purchasing processes, has expressed that it will be facilitating and monitoring the process and transition of the policy.

Originally Belmaker hoped to have the policy come to the City Administration Committee in December 2011. But concerns were raised regarding liability issues, so Belmaker worked with the City Attorney's Office to make some tweaks to the language of the policy to ensure the city was protected in terms of liability and the resolution amending the municipal code was added. Belmaker expressed excitement and satisfaction that the policy passed.

"We've been working, like I said, for a few months and I really tried to find something that would be not too general but also not too extensive that people would get lost and make it really as relevant as possible for the city's need," said Belmaker, "So I was really really glad to see Common Council pass these resolutions."

While the resolution has passed, there is still work to be done to ensure that the transition to the new policy happens smoothly.

"There still will be some more work to do within departments in terms of learning and training staff on how to best implement some parts of the policy," explained Belmaker, "Some parts are very straightforward. For bigger projects the implementation can be just a little more complex. So we still have to do some work in terms of that. But I do feel that if department heads and staff will all collaborate and support the effort that this will really help the city in strengthening its efforts in becoming a more sustainable organization."