



## Local government officials: Stay focused and persistent as you work to achieve sustainability targets

Written by Michael Keating | 15th May 2024

For cities and counties striving to their communities more sustainable, architect [Nate Thomas](#), AIA offers simple advice: “Inaction is worse than action. Keep the big picture in mind, but don’t forget the details.” Thomas serves as project manager and director of sustainability at [The Architectural Team](#) (TAT), a master planning, architecture and interior design firm based in Chelsea, Mass., that works on highly sustainable initiatives and projects nationwide.

Thomas says it is important for sustainability teams to stay focused: “It’s critical to hold onto the overarching goal of reducing carbon emissions, and to make decisions that will help achieve that aim.” He further notes: “But officials also need to recognize that there will be complications and intricacies in terms of how each decision affects a community’s overall resiliency and equality.”

Thomas urges local government officials to complete a detailed analysis before they embark on a sustainable project: “For instance, it’s important to utilize [Life-Cycle Assessments](#) (LCAs) to understand a product’s or a procedure’s whole life-cycle carbon intensity, as some decisions may appear beneficial at first but may actually produce negative results in the long term.”

He outlines how the above might play out in practice is with a new capital project: “Building a super-green, cutting-edge municipal facility could seem like the most sustainable path, but if that project requires demolishing an existing structure, the environmental cost of that demo might outweigh the operational energy-savings benefits of a new building.”

Thomas spotlights some potential options to consider: “With these embodied carbon considerations in mind, we often recommend exploring the possibilities for green retrofits and renovations—in many cases, these may all be viable paths.” He adds that his firm is nearing completion on a construction job that meets these parameters: “It is a project that restores and upgrades a large, 150-plus-year-old stone building in Massachusetts to levels of energy efficiency comparable to many contemporary facilities.”

Thomas says inequality needs to be taken into consideration during the process. “The truth about climate change is that it disproportionately affects underprivileged individuals and can actually worsen inequality if its impacts are not urgently addressed. In addition to this reality, well-intentioned sustainability regulations or policies can also increase inequality as they may impact the cost of energy, food and other essential goods and services.”

He notes that governments are increasingly recognizing that they need to quickly focus on inequality as an issue as they consider their community’s sustainability goals. “There is a growing awareness that sustainability policies must be evaluated to ensure they are progressing in an equitable manner. In practice, this means local governments will need to take the initiative and establish plans that are highly attuned to their communities’ capacity for reducing emissions and achieving sustainability goals in an equitable way.” Thomas observes: “The current trend is to acknowledge that there is no paint-by-numbers approach; every local government will need strategies that are specific to their communities.”

Thomas notes a few actions officials can take that can help cities and counties achieve their sustainability goals. These include establishing regulations, policies or standards that are geared towards reducing emissions and increasing resiliency; and adopting more sustainable health, building and energy codes.

The TAT executive says he has seen local governments in Massachusetts taking the above steps. “They are pushing ahead with some of the most forward-looking and progressive energy codes in the country. Similarly, governments can also adopt policies and regulations that support more green infrastructure and a cleaner and more climate-resilient power grid.”

He adds that city and county leaders can also incentivize businesses and residents to adopt more sustainable practices with tax credit programs and similar measures that ease the financial burden of sustainability upgrades. “In our experience working with both public agencies and private entities on major capital projects ranging from public housing redevelopments to large-scale mixed-use initiatives, tax credits and other incentives have played a significant role in enhancing sustainability outcomes.”

Thomas predicts the Bay State will add new policies to help achieve big-picture sustainability goals. “In the immediate future for Massachusetts specifically, we see the wider adoption of the [new specialized opt-in energy code](#) being the next phase in the sustainability push.” He predicts the code will be a useful tool: “This code is what will help the majority of communities throughout the state reach their sustainability goals for all new developments.”

Thomas says more work needs to be done to achieve sustainability wins down the road: “The simple answer is that we need to be clearly on the path towards decarbonization and on track to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. We need actionable plans that are actually in progress and not just being talked about endlessly. Of critical importance are actions to clean up the grid and improve public transit as well as other green infrastructure elements—and all of these actions need to have a focus on zero emissions.”

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