

Local Leaders in Sustainability



Green Counties



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Local Leaders in Sustainability: *Green Counties*
is the third report in a series that focuses on green
building at the local level. Earlier reports in the series
include:

Local Leaders in Sustainability: *A Study of Green
Building Programs in Our Nation's Communities*

Local Leaders in Sustainability: *Green Incentives*

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Cover Photo

Ben Franklin Elementary School, AIA/COTE 2006

Top Ten Green Project award recipient.

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Executive Summary

American counties are walking the walk on sustainability by creating impressive green building programs across the country. Local governments are charging ahead toward a greener future with focus and determination. *Local Leaders in Sustainability: Green Counties* is an analysis of the current state of green building development in the 200 most populous counties as of 2008.

The AIA worked with the National Association of Counties (NACo) to complete this project. [NACo's Green Government Initiative](#), of which the AIA is a founding member, provides comprehensive resources for local governments on all things green. NACo serves as a catalyst between local governments and the private sector to facilitate green government best practices, products, and policies that result in financial and environmental savings.

Local Leaders in Sustainability: Green Counties examines the top 200 American counties by population, representing a total population of 168,864,538 Americans, or a little more than half of the country. In conducting this study, the AIA spoke to planners, building officials, and sustainability managers in 147 counties and determined that a further 29 counties did not have a county government structure, such as a county commission or board of supervisors. The AIA and NACo discovered that among the top 200 county areas:

- 39 counties have a green building program, or at least 19.5 percent of all sample counties
- At least 42,949,498 people, or 25.6 percent of the sample population, live in counties with green building programs

- A further nine counties indicated that they are in a more advanced stage of developing green building programs, forecasting a future of increased green activity

Breaking down programs regionally helps demonstrate the degree to which green building programs have grown proportionately around the country:

- The Eastern Region has the most green building programs at 19, covering approximately 19 million people
- The Central Region has 7 programs, with approximately 9 million people living in those counties with green building programs
- The Mountain Region was a smaller portion of the sample, with only 3 programs; over 2 million people live in these counties
- The Western Region rounded out the survey with 10 green building programs and almost 13 million affected citizens

The programs that were chosen for the case studies provide an excellent cross-section of American green

building programs. The counties reflect the diversity of sustainability policy, and because many of these programs have also been established for a number of years, these communities have had the opportunity to see what works well and make adjustments as needed.

Alameda County, CA; Hennepin County, MN; King County, WA; and Montgomery County, MD have been chosen because they provide solid best practice examples of programs in different parts of the country that can be viewed as models. These counties are also representative of the original innovators at the county level. Partially as a result of policies such as these, buildings across the country have undergone a revolution in terms of the emphasis that is placed on resource efficiency and life-cycle performance. Another grouping of county governments across Florida is now overcoming legal barriers to create a culture of sustainable development that represents the next wave of green building policy.

The primary research in this report focuses on green building programs in the top 200 counties by population. However, there have also been impressive green building and sustainability initiatives undertaken by smaller counties in recent years. In order to provide the reader with an understanding of what these communities have accomplished in regards to green building, NACo reached out to smaller counties. [NACo's Online Green Government Database](#), a resource developed to catalogue the impressive sustainability programs and policies developed by counties, was also utilized for this report.

The states are often viewed as the laboratories of democracy, with innovative policy informing national policy. If this is true, then local governments must be the scientists. Local leaders understand the importance of their actions. Almost every county or city currently undertaking the process of creating their own green building policy spends months, and in some cases years, scouring the country for examples of other ordinances and resolutions to inform their own efforts and improve upon the success of others. *Local Leaders in Sustainability* is meant to assist these communities as they develop and enhance their green building programs.

Architects will continue to have a profound impact on the built environment in which we live, work, and play. The AIA is committed to advancing the practice of architecture by continuing to promote sustainable, low-impact building features. Green building policy is an important part of this process, and it is heartening to see all of the effort being put forth by local leaders. The experiences of these counties make it increasingly clear that investment in high-performance building programs is an efficient and popular use of taxpayer dollars.

This report documents the spread of green building programs, explores best practices, and provides tools for policymakers. The AIA and its component network have further resources, expertise, and tools to assist local, state, and federal governments as they write new legislation or amend existing green building codes in the pursuit of more sustainable policies.