

Breathe Deeply . . . And Other Exercises Managers Can Employ to Improve Air Quality

*Kenneth
Pulskamp*

Anyone living in southern California has experienced one of those “unhealthy air days,” as designated by the South Coast Air Quality Management District. The most serious pollution comes from ozone, which is invisible, and from PM10, which can be difficult to see. But don’t let this trait fool you. These problems may be invisible, but they are also deadly.

Since incorporation in 1987, the city of Santa Clarita, located in northern Los Angeles County, has worked hard to become a leader among local governments in improving local and regional air quality. The air-quality initiatives are part of the city’s “Sustainable Santa Clarita” campaign, a series of creative programs, mandates, and ordinances developed here as a comprehensive strategy to integrate environmental concerns, economic development, efforts toward community engagement and belonging, and urban design to preserve and improve the community’s high quality of life.

As a city that regularly allocates more money to fund youth, park, and recreational programs than law enforcement, Santa Clarita would be rather shortsighted if it didn’t take steps to see that these youth and recreational programs existed in a healthful, pleasant environment. In 2001, Santa Clarita proudly accepted a Model Community Achievement Award from the South Coast Air Quality Management District in recognition of the accomplishments of this aspect of “Sustainable Santa Clarita.” Here’s what the city did to improve its air quality.

Alternative Forms of Transportation and Fuel

- Ten percent of the city’s vehicle fleet is composed of alternative-fueled vehicles. In 2002, the city will construct the Santa Clarita region’s first compressed natural-gas fueling structure with a fast-fuel station.
- The city has facilitated an employee ride-share program, with incentives, that now boasts 53 employee participants, or better than 17 percent of the full-time workforce.

- Santa Clarita has built three Metrolink commuter-train stations in the city (no other participating city has as many stations except Los Angeles).
- Through grant funding and the city's general fund, Santa Clarita has constructed 14 miles of off-street bicycle/pedestrian trails, providing residents with a safe, nonpolluting method of transportation from one end of the city to the other.

Building and Development Standards

- In May 2000, Santa Clarita set incentives for builders to encourage the development of "green" buildings through the city's Community Energy Efficiency Program. This program, in conjunction with the Building Industry Association, encourages builders to meet a higher level of energy efficiency than that required by state codes. To date, 205 homes in Santa Clarita have been constructed under this program.
- At this time, the city is developing the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards for buildings, implementing the standards on a voluntary basis. LEED-certified buildings will include varying degrees of no or low-volatile organic-compound paints and adhesives, formaldehyde-free cabinets and countertops, use of natural ventilation, and other indoor and outdoor air-quality enhancements, as well as resource conservation and efficiency.
- Santa Clarita has adopted a local ordinance requiring buildings to implement dust-control measures at large construction sites.

Protection of Quality of Life

- Project Pollution Prevention was implemented in 1999, consolidating the city's pollution prevention messages and educational materials into one comprehensive public-education program. The program focuses on informing residents of what they can do to advance the cause of pollution prevention. We all sometimes get sick from the smog, become disenchanted with the outdoors, and withdraw from participating in city events and programs. But engaging the residents despite these disinclinations has been the city's goal. After all, quality of life is the concern of all.

While this list of accomplishments could be considered impressive for a relatively new city, what is even more impressive is the fact that all this activity has shown results! In 1987, the year Santa Clarita was incorporated, ozone pollution in the South Coast Air Basin resulted in 66 stage-one smog alerts, 196 days when the state standard was exceeded, and 160 days when the federal standard was exceeded.

In 2000, there were no stage-one smog alerts. The state ozone standards were exceeded on only 31 days, while the federal standard for ozone was exceeded on 16 days in the Santa Clarita Valley.

Santa Clarita Mayor Frank Ferry has said, “The tremendous satisfaction that derives from this project is [based on] how widespread and equal the benefit is for the entire valley. Oftentimes, city projects may only improve a small segment of the community.”

While completing a neighborhood park, installing a needed storm drain, and devising a local shopping plan for small businesses are rewarding and necessary endeavors, providing good air quality offers Santa Clarita great momentum toward reaching its daily goal of building and maintaining a healthy community for all of its residents and visitors.

A city like Santa Clarita, which is known for its clean air, then has a valuable ingredient of a stable foundation on which to maintain a desired quality of life for its residents and to promote economic development and tourism for its business community.

Kenneth Pulskamp is interim city manager, Santa Clarita, California.

Copyright © 2002, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA)