

Is Sustainable Consumption “Sustainability 2.0”?

When a team of city practitioners and leading researchers got together to learn about sustainable consumption, why did they leave the room wondering if sustainable consumption is actually “sustainability 2.0”?

The goal of the sustainable consumption convening was to advance the topic from concept to actionable local government policies. Spearheaded by Babe O’Sullivan from **Eugene** with funding from the USDN Innovation Fund, the convening included participants from **Boston, Denver, Flagstaff, Gaithersburg, Houston, Iowa City, Portland OR, San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Monica, and Vancouver**. During this convening many participants experienced a fundamental shift in their view of sustainability. It provided a new paradigm that was more holistic and encompassing than the resource conservation framework that typically frames urban sustainability. The convening was so impactful it spurred additional sustainable consumption projects with additional USDN members from **Seattle** to build on the convening’s learnings. This article summarizes key points from this convening.

What is Sustainable Consumption? Emerging definitions of sustainable consumption were highlighted in the [October Innovation Newsletter](#). They focus on repair, reuse, and developing structures for sharing, borrowing, and rental of goods that would otherwise be purchased. During the convening, a series of high-level themes emerged that are important to understand when considering sustainable consumption.

- **Economic and Natural Systems At Odds:** One of the most powerful and clarifying themes was that, at a fundamental level, the economic and natural systems are at odds. The economy is driven by the goal of economic growth, using high levels of material and energy. The partial result is pollution and inequity, while the natural system struggles to meet these demands.
- **Systemic Nature of Consumption:** Consumption occurs within the context of markets, like regulatory boundaries, wages, and tax structures. Social and cultural motivators are also huge drivers of consumption. Cities continue to explore and experiment with methods that facilitate market changes. Work is needed to define specific opportunities that will make local governments effective in this area.
- **Re-Focusing on Well-Being:** The primary focus can shift to well-being, which is often independent of high levels of consumption. Things like a secure livelihood, family and friends, personal growth and skill building, political and social engagement, and good health. Many of these cannot be bought.
- **Government Influence on Consumption:** Panelists argued that government at all levels has had a significant influence on building a consumer-based economy, and thus government has a legitimate role to play in modifying the market towards consuming less.
- **Signs of a Post-Consumer Society:** A number of signs may point to the emergence of a post-consumer society – things like declining household formation rates, decreased labor force participation rates, stagnant incomes, and a declining U.S. middle class.
- **Significance of the Sharing Economy:** There was also discussion of “bottom up” movements that are emerging in response to these conditions – things like the sharing economy, localization efforts, and others. The sharing economy in particular was the focus of much discussion.
- **Beware of the Rebound Effect:** Understanding the rebound effect is important. Gains in efficiency and spending power often translate into higher consumption. This fuels greater economic growth.

- **Addressing Equity:** Another major theme centered on equity and the need to address the growing disparities in income and social empowerment. One panel pointed out that good access to public resources, like parks, could help bring equity to a community. In considering ways to build more sustainable consumption patterns, it was determined that local government should avoid replicating structural inequities. Instead, they should use behavioral realities as a tool to further reduce consumption.
- **Local Government Paradox: Sustainable Consumption vs. Economic Prosperity:** Engaging local leaders on this topic quickly reveals the tension between consuming less and promoting local economic prosperity. Any suggestion of changing consumption is seen a potential threat to local business, sales tax revenues, and other elements on which local economies depend.
- **Building Local Infrastructure: Recycling Example:** Local governments should revisit how they built their recycling programs. Public infrastructure is needed in the form of regulations, services, education, and more to support a shift in consumption patterns.
- **Measurement and Metrics:** Sustainability directors in local government are expected to ground their work in measurable outcomes. It is difficult for governments to measure changes in consumption patterns; the private sector is designed to do this, but governments aren't.
- **Government Power in the Market:** It is important for governments to realize their limitations and to be strategic in the marketplace by leveraging regulation, educational opportunities, and capital investment in the context of consumer behavior.

Encouraging Sustainable Consumption in Policy. This content area is still young in the field of urban sustainability. The convening participants worked on framing how this thinking can be applied in a local policy context. Here are some guiding considerations:

- Integrate sustainable consumption into economic development strategies:
 - As with conservation in the utility sector, consider incentives, regulations, and business models that make selling less profitable than conservation.
 - Target specific sectors: examine ways to promote remanufacturing, resource recovery, and energy efficiency - and possibly, ways to influence life-cycle product design.
- Balance regulatory response:
 - Evaluate unsustainable market trends with an eye towards government's role in correcting them.
 - Take a comprehensive approach: level the playing field with policies that support consuming less across the board. Pilot at the neighborhood level.
- Build and expand city procurement policies to include life-cycle evaluation and repair.
- Aggregate city support for state and federal level action:
 - Examine the possibilities of carbon pricing, local infrastructure investment, and local wage and worker policies. Perhaps catalyze collective voice vehicles like USDN, the National League of Cities, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors.
- Consider local government benefit reforms, such as reduced workweeks for employees.
- Have policies that consider and promote shared spaces, such as informal markets and art incubators.
- Consider policies that allow housing alternatives such as micro-housing, co-housing, and co-ops.
- Align these efforts with existing climate action plans and initiatives for better assimilation.
- Educate leadership, management and elected officials on why this positively impacts the social, environment, and economic well-being of the communities they serve.