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# Municipal World

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**IPSOS REID / MUNICIPAL WORLD SURVEY**

**Municipal governments  
get failing grades on  
energy conservation**



**... does it  
even matter?**

# MENTORING BUILDINGS

## The soft path to sustainability

Ted Wilson

Canadian municipalities are playing a major role in demonstrating ways to address climate change. With aging facilities, increased responsibility for maintaining infrastructure, and diminishing opportunities for generating revenue, municipalities are turning to sustainable solutions to renew their built resources and educate their communities.

A key strategy involves commitment to the *soft path*, blending the efficient use of resources with renewable energy technologies. Pioneered by Amory Lovins, the soft path approach looks to manage demand for energy first, and then introduces sources of renewable energy to meet the reduced building needs. The practical benefits include the ability to maintain the same square footages with reduced operating budgets. Local knowledge and skill levels are also rising as experience in combining conservation measures with renewable energy technologies grows. And, of course, the use of less fuel from conventional sources is reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

For municipalities, their extensive stock of facilities represents a huge opportunity to demonstrate the role public buildings can play as mentors in illustrating this sustainable design concept and its application throughout their communities.

But first some background on why Canadians have risen to the challenge, what is happening in 2008, and what is unfolding ahead.

### Recent Events Prompt Action

Consider Ontario, where a consensus on the need for action on climate change is building at the municipal level. Recent regional events appear to have prompted this development.

The Ice Storm of 1998 destroyed thousands of trees and left hundreds of communities without heat and power, in some cases for weeks. Neighbours volunteered firewood, generators, food, and water. Ad hoc disaster relief centres were set up. Residents were advised to be prepared to wait for assistance for up to 72 hours. The need for local emer-

gency preparedness plans became immediately apparent. Communities woke up to the need to be more self-reliant in their own backyards.

The Walkerton Water Crisis in 2000 shook confidence in water supply and treatment infrastructure and standards. Government inquiries, regulation overhauls and system retrofits followed.

In 2003, a massive power failure shut down distribution grids across the north eastern US and Canada. Demand had exceeded infrastructure capacity. Again, hundreds of communities were left without power for several days. A pending Ontario initiative to deregulate power supply was cancelled. It was now apparent to elected officials that aging infrastructure was increasingly becoming a liability. Residents were more frequently being put at risk and costs for repairs and ongoing insurance coverage were escalating. Officials became determined to renew confidence in their constituencies as places to live, work and invest.

Communities are now focusing infrastructure renewal projects on ways to increase energy and environmental performance. As an example, in the order of 40 percent of the operating costs shouldered by communities in Ontario is directly related to maintaining water and sewage treatment



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