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Multnomah County, Portland eye joint purchasing power to eliminate toxics from public contracts

Published: Thursday, September 20, 2012, 4:20 PM Updated: Thursday, September 20, 2012, 10:09 PM



By **Dana Tims, The Oregonian**

Multnomah County and the city of Portland are embarking on an experiment to see if their joint purchasing power can encourage manufacturers to eliminate toxic ingredients from products used in public contracts.

Both groups approved identical resolutions this week authorizing pilot programs that will include a new question for private companies bidding on city and county projects: "What kind of chemicals are in the materials you are proposing?"

The formally named Healthy Purchasing Initiative follows similar guidelines approved earlier this year by the state. It makes Multnomah County and the city the first municipal governments in Oregon to use the public bidding process as a way to "green up" their buildings.

The initiative is most likely to involve contracts pertaining to cleaning supplies, office supplies, building products and materials, pipes and related infrastructure materials.

"There are probably toxics in a lot of things," county commission **Chairman Jeff Cogen** said. "But what toxics? And what things? This is designed to produce information to inform our buying decisions."

Reporting of all information will remain voluntary, he said, and contracts will continue to be awarded to qualified low-bidders.

The long-term hope, said Cogen and others, is that this effort will create, in terms of disclosure, a "common language" for companies and manufacturers bidding on public contracts.

"Finding products with no toxics is a huge challenge for the industry," said Clark Brockman, a **SERA Architects'** principal dedicated to sustainability. "They've never had to answer these questions before."

Traditionally, contracts have contained so-called "red lists," which ban specific chemicals from being included in a proposed scope of work. This new approach inverts that approach by instead asking companies to reveal the types of chemicals they plan on using.

Internet giant Google has adopted a similar approach in the way it bids contracts, Brockman said, having

shifted from using extensive red lists to asking, in effect, "What's in your stuff?"

"The goal is to promote transparency in the products local governments purchase," **Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman** said. "We are simply saying, we would like you to produce information about chemicals."

Developing common formats that can be used by multiple government agencies also has the benefit of cutting overall project costs, said Andrea Durbin, the **Oregon Environmental Council's** executive director.

"It's a model to test and learn from and adapt," she said.

The city of Portland has identified two pilot projects it will use for the initiative, Saltzman said. Both are in the city's **Bureau of Environmental Services**. One involves a general contract for piping materials, while the other governs renovation of a building at the bureau's **Columbia Boulevard Wastewater Treatment Plant** in North Portland.

Multnomah County has yet to identify its first pilot project, but Cogen told other commissioners he will brief them on specifics of the proposal before it goes out for bids.

– **Dana Tims**

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