

Municipal World

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AUGUST 2008

IPSOS REID / MUNICIPAL WORLD SURVEY

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



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

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vol. 118, number 8



Ipsos Reid / Municipal World survey 4
Municipal governments get failing grades on energy conservation ... but does it even matter?

Prince George, BC goes green 9
The City of Prince George is taking early action to lessen the effects of climate changes on its community.

Role of the climate change consultant 13
When a municipality is working to address the impacts of climate change and to tackle energy and environmental issues, expert knowledge can help.

Have Canadians gone BANANA? 15
Municipalities are where the buck stops on most land use decisions, making them the logical target of NIMBY attacks. Municipalities must now face the challenge of dealing with the most prevalent member of the NIMBY family – the BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anybody) .

The future of drive-thrus 19
With fast food comprising 40 percent of our diet – 78 percent of it obtained in the drive-thru – communities are looking for planning solutions.

Mentoring buildings 21
Municipalities can take leadership on the soft path to sustainability.

Biodiesel helps boost environmental performance 23
Can biodiesel help shrink your environmental footprint and improve local air quality, without putting a squeeze on finances? Recent studies indicate “yes.”

Public libraries and accreditation 25
What is it, who does it, and what being accredited does for your community.

Green Community Technologies 27
Communities are “getting smart,” leveraging smart growth, energy efficiency and public facilities.

Municipal campaign finance – Part 1 31
The debate over ward versus at-large elections has generally revolved around determining which system best suits the needs of citizens; less attention has been paid to the effect of municipal electoral systems on political campaign finance.

regular features and zones

coming events	20, 22, 24, 30, 43	management zone	39
editor's notes	3	procurement zone	37
governance zone	35	the reading room	41



Susan M. Gardner
Executive Editor

The report by Catherine Knaus on page 5 reveals some interesting perceptions held by members of the Canadian public with respect to municipalities and energy conservation. I was surprised to learn that, rather than leaders in this area, municipalities are generally perceived as laggards.

Whether those perceptions are borne out in practice is a question beyond the scope of this research. I suspect, though, that most citizens would be surprised to learn the actual scope of activity undertaken by local governments to promote and encourage energy conservation – both within the general public and within their own operations.

There are many excellent examples of municipalities across Canada showing leadership in this area. The Town of East Gwillimbury, Ontario is one municipality that has demonstrated some remarkable initiative and foresight. The town has included a bold energy initiatives strategy as part of its strategic plan since 2006. That year, council passed a resolution requiring residential developments of 10 or more units to be constructed for Energy Star qualification. Council also passed a resolution directing that all new town facilities, as well as new industrial, commercial, institutional, and high-rise residential buildings be built to LEED standards. After January 2010, the LEED standards policy will also extend to all major

renovation projects for industrial, commercial, institutional, and high rise residential buildings.

Recognizing that buildings can account for almost half of a community's energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, East Gwillimbury has taken these proactive steps to ensure that this impact is being significantly reduced. As an example, the Energy Star homes typically use 30 to 40 percent less energy, with emission of two to three times less than that of homes built to the minimum requirements under the Ontario Building Code. And, although the certification can add between \$5,000 and \$7,000 to the construction cost of the average dwelling, resulting cost savings for the homeowner are in the neighbourhood of \$750 annually (depending on the utility rate). With current fuel costs rapidly escalating, those savings can only be expected to rise significantly as well.

So, regardless of perceptions, municipalities like East Gwillimbury and others that acted early to deliberately develop a culture of conservation in their communities have helped to prepare their residents for what most certainly will be a high cost energy future. Whether or not the Canadian public knows it, their local governments will have a key role in determining how well communities are prepared to deal with this new challenge.

IPSOS REID / MUNICIPAL WORLD SURVEY:

Municipal governments get failing grades on energy conservation ...

DOES IT EVEN MATTER?

Catherine Knaus

The environment has emerged as a key area of public concern in recent years. Lately, it seems that everyone, from individuals to politicians to industries, is talking about the fate of our planet and what can be done to ensure a healthy earth for future generations. Energy conservation is one thing that is often mentioned as a way everyone can help slow down and reverse some of the environmental damage. Defined simply, energy conservation can be thought of as making conscious decisions and actions to reduce one's use of energy. This might involve being more efficient, or cutting back the amount of energy used.

While everyone can play a part when it comes to energy conservation, what order of government (federal, provincial, or municipal) do Canadians think should be most responsible for these types of initiatives? How does the public rate each order of government when it comes to promoting and demonstrating energy conservation? How do perceptions of municipal governments compare to those of the provincial and federal governments?

To answer these questions, Ipsos Reid, in partnership with *Municipal World*, conducted a survey aimed at better understanding Canadians' attitudes towards energy conservation.¹

Catherine is a Senior Research Manager with Ipsos Reid's public affairs team in Vancouver. She has five years' experience conducting public opinion research for clients in a variety of sectors, and is a key member of Ipsos Reid's Municipal Affairs practice.

Failing Grades on Energy Conservation

The survey finds that few Canadians believe their municipal government is doing a good job when it comes to energy conservation (see Figure 1). Only three-in-ten (30 percent) say their municipal/local government is doing a good job promoting energy conservation among citizens, compared to half (51 percent) saying their municipal government is doing a poor job in this regard. Similarly, only 28 percent believe their municipal/local government is doing a good job in its own energy conservation efforts, while 42 percent provide a poor rating.

Further, in both instances, relatively large percentages are unsure how to rate their municipal government's performance, pointing to a general lack of familiarity with municipal energy conservation efforts.

While municipalities may already be participating in energy conservation initiatives, the survey suggests these are not being communicated to the general public in a meaningful and relevant way. This suggestion is further supported by survey findings showing that among

¹ The survey was conducted between April 17 and 22, 2008 among a sample of 1,003 adult Canadians randomly selected from Ipsos Reid's Internet household panel. Results based on a sample size of 1,003 are considered accurate to within ± 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire adult Canadian population been polled. The data has been statistically weighted to ensure the composition of the sample by region, age, and gender reflects that of the actual Canadian population according to the 2006 Census data.

the 51 percent who believe their municipal government does a poor job promoting energy conservation among citizens, the top three reasons for feeling this way are a “lack of promotion or advertising” (22 percent), “aren’t doing anything/no action” (17 percent), and “have not heard anything/no information” (14 percent). This suggests that some citizens feel negatively simply because they haven’t heard anything positive, which may again point to an overall lack of familiarity with municipal energy conservation efforts.

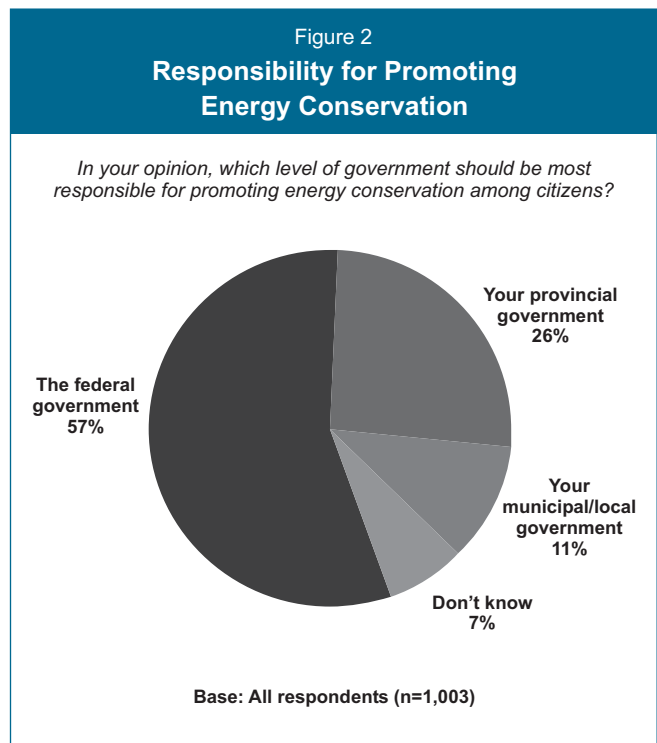
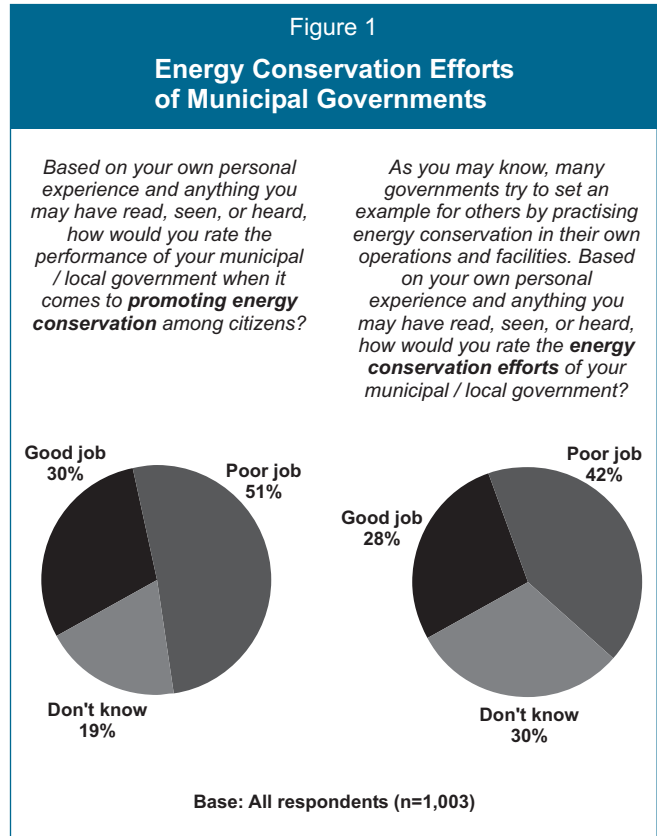
Does It Even Matter?

While municipalities may score poorly when it comes to energy conservation, the survey also shows that very few Canadians see energy conservation as a municipal responsibility compared to the role played by other levels of government (see Figure 2). Specifically, only 11 percent of Canadians believe their municipal/local government should be most responsible for promoting energy conservation among citizens. Rather, this responsibility is seen as lying primarily with the federal (57 percent) and, to a lesser extent, provincial (26 percent) government.

Further, when asked which level of government should be the next most responsible for promoting energy conservation among citizens, Canadians are much more likely to point to their provincial government (56 percent) than their municipal/local government (20 percent). Overall, these findings show that the majority of Canadians do not see energy conservation as a municipal responsibility. In that context, one might argue that municipal governments’ poor performance ratings need not be a cause for concern as the public has relatively low expectations for them in this regard.

Further, municipal governments are not alone in their poor performance ratings regarding energy conservation efforts. In fact, Canadians see all three levels of government as performing poorly in this area (see Figure 3a and Figure 3b). For example, half (49 percent) say the federal government is doing a poor job when it comes to promoting energy conservation among citizens and 43 percent feel this way about their provincial government’s performance.

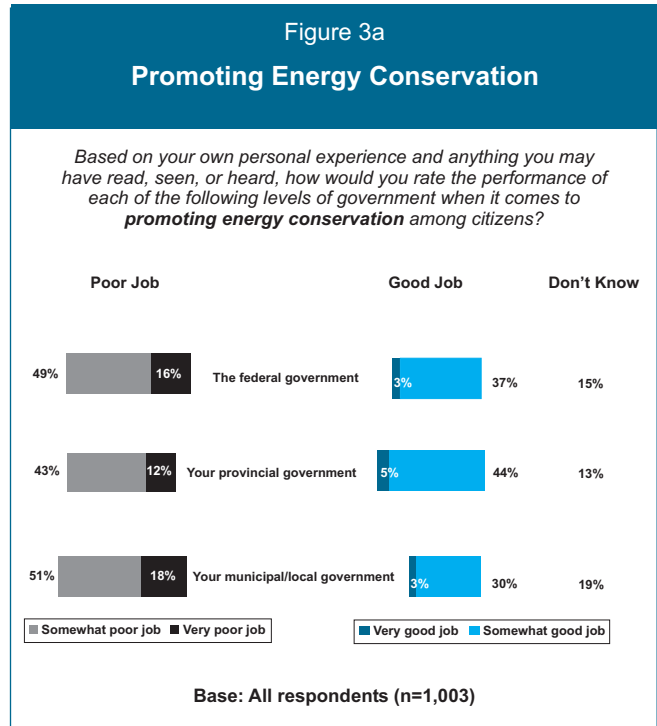
These results are only slightly better than the 51percent saying their municipal/local government is doing a poor job in this regard. Similarly, 43 percent of Canadians rate the federal government’s energy conservation efforts poorly and 39 percent feel this way about their provincial government, both of which are not significantly different from what is reported for municipi-



pal/local governments (42 percent poor job). Clearly, Canadians see all three levels of government needing improvement when it comes to energy conservation. However, in the eyes of the public, this is probably a greater concern for the federal and provincial governments, which are most likely to be seen as responsible for these types of initiatives.

Given the public's low expectations for municipal governments when it comes to energy conservation, some may be tempted to ask why they should even bother with energy conservation initiatives in the first place. The survey points to two good reasons why municipal governments may want to make these a priority despite low public expectations.

First, there is an opportunity to "delight" citizens by showing leadership in an area that many feel is lacking in government today. Second, energy conservation is important to Canadians, with 69 percent rating energy conservation as "extremely" (24 percent) or "very" (45 percent) important (see Figure 4). Another 28 percent say this is "somewhat important" to them. Clearly, this is an



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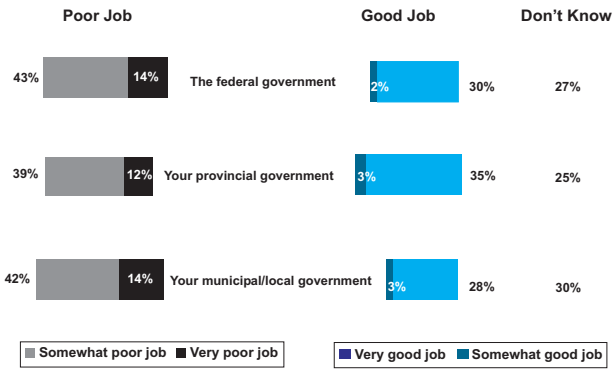
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Figure 3b
Energy Conservation Efforts

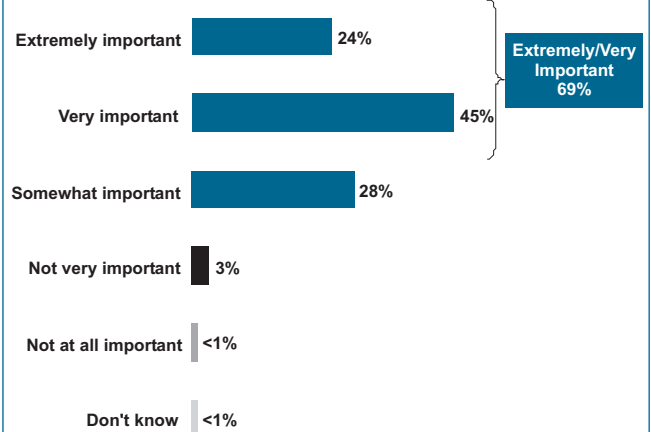
As you may know, many governments try to set an example for others by practising energy conservation in their own operations and facilities. Based on your own personal experience and anything you may have read, seen, or heard, how would you rate the **energy conservation efforts** of each of the following levels of government?



Base: All respondents (n=1,003)

Figure 4
Importance of Energy Conservation

How important is energy conservation to you personally?



Base: All respondents (n=1,003)

issue that resonates with the public – and for that reason is worth paying attention to.

Key Takeaways

While municipal governments are seen as performing poorly when it comes to energy conservation, the public generally does not see this as a municipal responsibility. Rather, primary responsibility is seen as lying with the federal – and to a lesser extent, provincial – government.

In addition, municipalities' poor performance ratings when it comes to energy conservation are not unique, with all levels of government (federal, provincial, and municipal) performing similarly poorly. There is also a

general lack of familiarity with government-related energy conservation efforts. If governments are already participating in these types of initiatives, they need to be communicated to citizens in a more meaningful and relevant way.

Despite these low public expectations, however, municipal governments may nonetheless want to take steps to improve public perceptions of their energy conservation efforts given the importance of this issue to Canadians. Further, low public expectations mean it should be fairly easy for municipalities to surpass what is expected of them to delight citizens and be seen as energy conservation leaders. *MW*

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