



Case Study: How Groups Passed the Buffalo PBT-Free Purchasing Policy

“We commend the Buffalo Common Council for passing this initiative as it will reduce the purchase of products in the City that may be asthma triggers.

Prescription costs, doctors’ fees, lost wages due to time off from work for parents of asthmatic children, and the un-quantifiable cost of school absenteeism add up to a hefty burden for families and society from asthma. By switching to safer products we could be offering a child the priceless gift of easy breathing.”

Victoria McLaughlin, West Side Community Asthma Project

In 2004, Buffalo became the first City in New York to pass a **PBT-Free Green Purchasing Policy**, wielding its multi-million dollar purchasing power to drive markets for safer products and build towards a comprehensive statewide toxics policy that addresses persistent bioaccumulative toxic chemicals (PBTs).

PBT pollutants are chemicals that are toxic, persist in the environment and bioaccumulate in food chains and, thus, pose risks to human health and the environment. Health impacts of PBTs include reproductive disorders, cancer, birth defects, declines in wildlife populations, hormone disruption, learning disabilities, and other health problems. PBTs are passed to children in the womb and through breastfeeding, impacting them at the most vulnerable time of their lives.

This case study outlines the key steps taken by a statewide grassroots organization, Citizens’ Environmental Coalition (CEC), to pass the PBT-Free Green Purchasing Policy.

1. City of Buffalo Selected After Strategic Analysis

First, CEC conducted a strategic analysis of the various cities and counties that would be likely to support a Green Purchasing Policy. CEC selected Buffalo to introduce the first NY municipal toxic-free purchasing policy for a number of strategic reasons.

- Buffalo and the areas that surround it, such as Niagara Falls and the Great Lakes, historically had been adversely impacted by persistent toxic chemicals, such as dioxins and mercury.
- The Buffalo City Council was relatively progressive on environmental issues, and there were a few City Councilmembers who might champion a toxic-free purchasing policy.

- A similar policy was enacted by the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning.
- CEC had a strong base of support among other community and environmental groups in the area and a strong membership base.
- CEC could connect the PBT-Free policy to another campaign opposing the siting of a PVC (polyvinyl chloride) fabrication plant on the Lake Erie waterfront in Buffalo.
- Buffalo is the second largest city in New York State. If CEC could get it passed in Buffalo, this would set an example and build momentum to have it passed in other cities.

2. Learning from our Allies in Other States

CEC networked with other groups to obtain information and sample policies. They conducted phone interviews with key allies in other states that had successfully introduced similar Green Purchasing Policies, such as in Boston, MA; Seattle, WA; and San Francisco, CA. CEC found out how groups introduced and passed their policies, and what they did to ensure implementation, which was invaluable in developing the Buffalo policy and strategy.

3. Innovative Educational Event Starts the Campaign

To kick-off the campaign, CEC organized a private invitation-only screening of the award-winning documentary *Blue Vinyl* for Buffalo City Councilmembers and their legislative staff. We brought the director of the film, Judith Helfand, to speak at the event. With humor, chutzpah and a piece of vinyl siding firmly in hand, Helfand, a Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, sets out in search of the truth about polyvinyl chloride (PVC), America's most popular plastic. From Long Island to Louisiana to Italy, she unearths the facts about PVC and its negative effects on human health and the environment.

After the film was shown, CEC raised the idea of introducing a PBT-Free Green Purchasing Policy in the City. We discussed how the City could help address some of the problems raised in *Blue Vinyl* by using the City's economic purchasing power to buy safe toxic-free products. At the event, a councilmember expressed interest in introducing a Green Purchasing Policy. We thanked him and asked him to meet with us to start work on a policy.

CEC also held three successful *Blue Vinyl* screenings for the Buffalo community, architects and labor union members and labor groups. This helped us to raise awareness among key constituencies that could help support the proposed policy.

4. Introducing the Policy

CEC reviewed toxic-free purchasing policies from around the country. Taking the best elements of the various policies, we drafted a PBT-Free Green Purchasing Resolution for Buffalo. We then met with the interested Councilmember and asked him to introduce the policy and he agreed. After the Resolution was introduced, it was sent to a Committee for consideration.

5. Building Support and an Effective Coalition

CEC organized a coalition of over 20 local, regional and statewide organizations to support the policy. It included health organizations such as the Learning Disabilities Association of WNY, environmental groups such as the NY Public Interest Research Group, Great Lakes United and Friends of the Buffalo Niagara Rivers, labor groups such as the Coalition for Economic Justice and the Western New York Council on Occupational Safety and Health, and civic organizations such as the League of Women Voters of Buffalo Niagara and Citizen Action.

We circulated an endorsement memo asking organizations to sign on in support of the Buffalo PBT-Free Purchasing Policy. This was an effective way to show strong public support from an alliance of groups in our meetings with city legislators. CEC also asked groups to mail and fax letters of support to key legislators. As needed, we helped groups by drafting the letters for them.

CEC set up meetings with the Buffalo Common Council Committee Chair and every Councilmember that sat on the committee to ask for their support. We distributed packets of information, which included the proposed Resolution, newspaper articles on the problems of persistent toxic chemicals in the Buffalo Niagara Falls region, and a list of over 20 organizations that supported the policy. We also included a memo with examples of products the City was likely purchasing that contained PBT chemicals. These meetings were key activities in our campaign. At their conclusion, we had the support of almost every single Councilmember on the committee.

CEC then set up meetings with all the other Councilmembers on the Buffalo Common Council and informed them of the need for the Resolution and the strong public support.

6. Passing the Policy

Within a month of introduction, a committee public hearing was held. CEC did outreach and made sure key speakers registered to testify in support of the Resolution. We helped some leaders by reviewing or assisting in the development of their testimony. Groups testifying included representatives of the Buffalo Environmental Management Commission, Buffalo Pest Management Board, Sierra Club Niagara Group, St. Joseph University Parish Social Justice Committee, Erie County Department of Environment and Planning, Great Lakes United, and the NY Public Interest Research Group.

After the hearing, the resolution was voted out of committee unanimously. CEC continued to advocate for the Resolution with meetings, letters and phone calls. In a few weeks, the resolution was voted on and unanimously adopted by the Buffalo City Council.

CEC issued a news release announcing that Buffalo was the first city in the state to adopt a PBT-Free Green Purchasing Resolution, and Associated Press and other key media outlets did stories on the victory.

"I am proud to sponsor the PBT-Free Purchasing Resolution which will go a long way in protecting Buffalo residents from toxic chemical exposure," said Councilmember Antoine Thompson, who was the lead sponsor of the policy. "This resolution demonstrates the City's commitment to ensuring a healthy and safe environment for generations to come."

7. Implementing the Policy

CEC knew that it was important to work collaboratively with the city purchasing staff in order to effectively implement the policy. A supportive City Councilmember sponsored a few meetings where we met with the city staff who did purchasing to discuss how the policy could be implemented.

Over the next six months, CEC held regular meetings with the city staff and assisted them by:

- Reviewing proposed contracts, and identifying products the City would likely be purchasing that would lead to persistent toxic pollution;
- Identifying safer products, including how these products compared environmentally and on a cost and performance basis; and
- Compiling and presenting information to purchasers with our recommendations.

The Buffalo policy has helped pave the way for similar efforts around the state. Since its passage, similar policies were enacted in New York City and Hudson, NY, and proposals have been introduced in Long Island, Syracuse, Albany and the NYS Assembly and Senate.

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