

2014

# Influences and Experiences of City Council Members on Environmental Policy Decision Making

Bobbie Brown  
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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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2014

Abstract

Influences and Experiences of City Council Members on  
Environmental Policy Decision Making

by

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MPA, DeVry University, 2008

MAFM, DeVry University, 2007

BS, Appalachian State University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

December 2014

## Abstract

Ineffective environmental policies pose a problem for municipalities as they strive to create sustainable communities. Improving these policies may establish standard practices that assist municipalities in meeting related environmental goals. Statistics show the municipalities within this study operate at different levels of goal achievement. Little is known, however, about the influences that directly affect the development of environmental policies. The purpose of this study was to determine the ways in which public officials address environmental issues and the factors considered in policy discussions that lead to their decisions. The theoretical framework comprised Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's advocacy coalition and Arrow's rational choice theory. This phenomenological study explored the experiences of city council members within a region of 10 cities in southern California. Interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of 5 city council members from 4 adjoining cities, 1 city staff member, and 1 agency representative with knowledge of all 10 cities. Data were analyzed with 3 cycles of coding to identify themes and patterns. Emergent themes included meeting community needs, educating the public, being fiscally responsible, and "doing the right thing." Participants recognized the effect of their personal influences and biases, particularly religious beliefs, on environmental policy decisions, although political affiliation appeared to be unrelated to these biases. The implications for positive social change include informing and educating both public officials and community members about regional environmental issues and their related community needs and goals.

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife, Lea Brown. She has remained steadfast and kept me focused on the ultimate goal. I could not have taken on such an endeavor without her support and encouragement. I truly appreciate her passion for recycling and environmental initiatives, which fueled my desire to initiate this study.

## Acknowledgments

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Global climate change remains a topic of significant consequence to all citizens around the world and continues to grow in importance within the political realm. Climate scientists have provided solid evidence of its progression and offered details of the negative effects seen in the United States and around the world since the industrial revolution. Countless negative effects exist, with the following examples depicting a selection of real occurrences. The American Meteorological Society (AMS) reported a continuous increase in greenhouse gases (GHG) for 2012, with the year marked as one of the top 10 warmest years in recorded history (Blunden & Arndt, 2013). James Hansen, scientist with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), warned that statistically significant temperature increases essentially equate to progressive climate change (Dellinger, 2013). Permafrost atop the world's highest mountains showed consistent signs of warming, and 2012 reflected numbers detailing the driest year since 1988, with precipitation well below normal in the United States (Blunden & Arndt, 2013). Military experts credited climate change for instability and civil unrest in volatile regions, which may add to political tensions and increased security concerns (Matthew & Hammill, 2009). These findings and more present a disheartening outlook on the quality of life afforded by the earth for future generations. Temperature fluctuations, groundwater depletion, super-storm occurrences, and other climatic events may place considerable difficulty on the ability of earth's inhabitants to continue in their current standard of living.

However, engaged citizens may still take action and combat these climatic changes. Advocates of sustainability contend that technological and political barriers to sustainable development can be overcome through demanding and participating in behaviors that cultivate innovation (Matthew & Hammill, 2009) and address global climate issues. Actions taken as a result of the discovery of the hole in the ozone in the 1970s are prime examples of behaviors that led to positive changes. Once engaged citizens realized the severity of the problem, they worked to ban the chemicals found to be the cause of this life-threatening phenomenon (Goleman, Bennett, & Barlow, 2012).

With proper monitoring and proactive measures, the anticipation of *tipping points*, defined as points at which a gradual change creates a new normal state, can do more to reduce negative impacts of climate change (National Academy of Sciences, 2013). Various approaches aid in the anticipation of tipping points while also creating interventions that reduce the negative impact felt by communities. Structural measures include building levees or seawalls to protect against rising sea levels. Planning measures minimize risk by altering current building and zoning codes to prevent new construction in at-risk areas such as endangered species' habitats. Tools for response efforts focus on the aftermath of emergency situations such as wildfires or intense heat waves. Market-based incentives exist such as those for installation of renewable energy sources on commercial and residential structures (Bedsworth & Hanak, 2010). All measures mentioned above fall within the authority of local, state, and federal government officials.

Yet planning efforts to include population growth and environmental conservation may not effectively consider historical data due to significant shifts in baseline figures.



For example, current sea levels do not equate to levels seen 20 years ago. Thus, proactive measures taken for those purposes must address coastal development while also considering increased coastal erosion. A thorough assessment of potential negative impacts remains crucial to ascertaining the most realistic interventions for communities (Bedsworth & Hanak, 2010). Investment in renewable energy sources; increased water conservation efforts, particularly in drought-stricken areas; enhanced recycling programs; and improved public transportation choices to reduce the amount of personal vehicles on roads represent proactive measures falling directly within the authority of local governments. Local governments acting concurrently and consistently hold the potential to make a significant impact.

Municipalities remain the first line of defense as the largest waste producers and energy users. The *Brundtland Report* employed this argument due to the increasing global population that would likely live in urban areas (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Municipalities may foster partnerships with pertinent stakeholders and have the greatest opportunity to encourage citizens to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006). Municipal officials may reasonably enhance or enact environmental policies that link directly to sustainable initiatives with the purpose of decreasing negative effects of global climate change within their immediate boundaries (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Dellinger, 2013). The issuance of federal regulations could push municipalities and states to be more proactive in sustainable pursuits (Wheeler, 2008). For example, recycling programs decrease the amount of GHG in the atmosphere by reducing the amount of

garbage placed in landfills. Effective environmental policies, particularly recycling programs, may create improvements in standard municipal practices, which can ultimately bear significant results in meeting established environmental goals.

Chapter 1 continues with a relevant structure for this study beginning with an overview of related literature and description of the gap noted. Identification of the problem statement leads into the study's purpose. Next, I outline the research questions and link them to the subsequent conceptual framework. The chapter proceeds with the nature of the study, which provides a brief introduction to the methodology. I present operational definitions related to terms encountered during the investigation and address explanations of the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Finally, in presenting the significance of the study, I describe the anticipated results in relation to positive social change.

### **Background**

The study focused on municipal authority held by elected city council members and the growing push to address environmental issues at local levels through solid environmental governance. While the adaptability of public policy allows officials to adjust to current situations, a standard process exists and begins with problem identification. The following statement suggests a simplified version of this process: Problems lead to courses of action placed on agendas to policy voting and finally to policy implementation (Kingdon, 2011). The experiences and specific factors considered during environmental policy decision making remain an area of emphasis in this study.

In the formation of environmental policies, inclusion of the affected community is a critical element of the policy process. Public meetings allow residents to voice their opinion of and garner clarification on anticipated regulations (Adams, 2004). Community feedback not only opens an essential line of communication; comments from citizens often impact city council member voting records (Barker & Bearce, 2012) or even provide alternate courses of action, which can prove feasible for the community as a whole (Bakker, Denters, Oude Vrielink, & Klok, 2012). The feedback process essentially allows those affected the most by proposed environmental legislation to weigh in on the discussion prior to any final decisions or rulings.

Municipal government officials sit on the other side of this open line of communication. Environmental attitudes of city council members represent crucial components of the policy process. Coalitions formed either inside or outside of governance play a role in subsequent policy decisions. City council members involved with environmental citizenship actually promote the common good and may also create the necessary synergy to make lasting changes for the benefit of the community and beyond (Jones, Sophoulis, Iosifides, Botetzagias, & Evangelinos, 2009). Advocacy coalitions to which city council members may align can have considerable influence on environmental policy decisions through the demonstration of advocacy coalition framework (ACF) assumptions (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009).

City council members give weight to several factors during policy decision-making discussions, including political affiliation, religious views, and degree of environmental concern. The majority of politicians align with either right (conservative)

or left (liberal) philosophies, which may dictate their stance on specific policies (Conover & Feldman, 1981; Dalton, 2009; Franklin & Jackson, 1983). Historically, those with more liberal views have shown more support for environmental policies (Lubell, Feiock, & Handy, 2009; Lybecker, McBeth, & Kusko, 2013). However, the environmentalist movement of the 1970s and 1980s brought about green parties, which developed new ideological perspectives from which to address environmental issues (Dalton, 2009). Some religious interpretations, such as those of end-times theologians, place no effort toward sustainable development for the benefit of future generations due to the time factor of such growth. End-times theologians consider planning for future generations unnecessary due to the second coming and end of life on earth (Barker & Bearce, 2012). The concept of environmental concern takes into account personal attitudes and actions that may benefit the natural environment either directly or indirectly (Alibeli & White, 2011; Konisky et al., 2008; Stern & Dietz, 1994).

The question remained as to the exact experiences and weight allocated to various factors identified during this study. Which consideration imparts the most influence to city council members during policy discussions within this region? This study addressed that gap and identified two major factors considered during environmental policy development within this region of Southern California. The study results also provided a description of relevant experiences as reported by informants. These particular findings have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of the policy process as executed by the respective city council members.

### **Problem Statement**

Ineffective and inconsistent environmental policies and programs pose a problem for municipalities as they strive to create sustainable communities. Enhancement of these policies and programs may establish standard practices that assist municipalities with meeting related environmental goals. With a special emphasis placed on waste diversion and recycling programs, municipalities must meet certain rates as established by the State of California. Statistics show municipalities belonging to the Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) operate at different levels (CalRecycle, 2014). Thus, a compelling need exists for the execution of efforts toward understanding the policy process and significant influences that may persuade policy makers to develop, implement, and enforce effective and consistent environmental policies.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this qualitative study required an examination of the phenomenon associated with environmental policy discussions among city council members within Southern California's Coachella Valley region. The weight of various factors considered by city council members throughout the course of the process impacted final policy decisions. Proponents and opponents of progressive environmental action may find this information crucial to devising arguments for environmental policy discussions. City council members expressed self-awareness and recognized how their personal influences and biases affected subsequent environmental policy decisions. Respective staff and community members also gained a greater understanding of elected representatives' attitudes with regard to environmental regulations.

## Research Questions

The premise of this investigation related to the experiences of and factors considered by city council members within the targeted population. The two primary research questions elaborated on this premise as follows:

- RQ1: What are the experiences of municipal decision makers during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation?
- RQ2: What methods are used for identifying the appropriate facts to consider during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation?

## Conceptual Framework

Sustainability persists as a critical element of environmental governance; recycling and related policies work to achieve an imperative aspect of sustainability for communities. This study used the ACF to explore environmental policy formation and associated influence of environmental research. As a second option, elements of rational choice theory (RCT) were used as a contrast to ACF. By applying the concepts of environmental concern and ecological literacy, it is possible to gain insight into the attitudes and behaviors manifested in individuals who sought out and supported sustainable initiatives through policy mechanisms.

Advocacy coalitions operate at three levels, which form a hierarchy: deep core, policy core, and secondary beliefs. *Policy core beliefs* denote more rigid principles than *secondary beliefs* but remain more flexible than *deep core beliefs* (Weible et al., 2009). By definition, participating city council members did not align with or belong to a specific advocacy coalition. However, some city council members noted the use of

information provided by more thorough advocacy groups after confirmatory research.

Board and commission memberships did influence city council members' environmental policy decisions.

Another avenue of policy discussion and formation existed with RCT. However, participating city council members did not focus primarily on the immediate satisfaction provided by decisions. Predictions of RCT suggest that people make decisions that optimize their expected utility among all possibilities; thus, some decision-making scenarios result in questionable decisions. These questionable decisions may inflict punishment on others (the principal) while also decreasing the personal reward of the decision maker (the agent; Hewig et al., 2011). The predictions of RCT as referenced did not hold true for this study.

Participation in and support of recycling and other environmental programs may demonstrate an individual's degree of environmental concern. Literary sources maintain three components of environmental concern as social altruism, egoism, and biospheric values (Alibeli & White, 2011; Schultz, 2001; Stern & Dietz, 1994). The influence of a city council member's self-described understanding of environmental concern may be used as a predictor of environmental policy support.

Ecological literacy emphasizes the importance of the earth and its natural ecosystems; it increases awareness regarding the eventual effects of all actions and behaviors. Five fundamental aspects demonstrate ideologies regarding living systems, natural design, systems thinking, sustainability, and community collaboration (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2013). This study investigated city council members' understanding of

ecological literacy and the value given during discussions and decision-making sessions relating to environmental policies and programs. As noted by participants, understanding and demonstrating ecological awareness remain critical components in the effective use of all resources in sustainable efforts.

Chapter 2 provides a more detailed discussion of conceptual frameworks and related environmental principles for use in this study. This study used advocacy coalition and rational choice as structural components of policy development. The research questions related to both conceptual frameworks and were used to ascertain their relative weight on final policy decision making as individual city council members' experiences and policy mechanisms affected the policy process.

### **Nature of the Study**

The study involved taking various policy concepts from the current body of literature and combining these concepts into an interrelated point of view based on the experiences described by participants. I merged the separate concepts of public policy, environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainable development and applied these concepts in conjunction with ACF and RCT. The study results demonstrated the implications each concept holds for city council members as a part of the policy process.

City council members placed consistent weights on various factors related to concepts of environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainable development as well as other ideals when discussing environmental policies. Adequately comprehending an individual city council member's understanding of each concept required an in-depth investigation of the respective concepts as elements of the policy process. The study was



used to recognize relevant influences and individual city council member attitudes, which provided needed insight into how the overall environmental policy process develops.

City council members serving municipalities within the CVAG comprised the target population. A phenomenological investigation of city council member experiences provided greater insight into factors considered during environmental policy development and implementation. Interview sessions embodied the optimal atmosphere in which to ascertain these experiences as explained by city council members. Interviews provided an opportunity to personally observe actions while letting the city council members discuss related aspects and responsibilities of their role in the community.

I subsequently analyzed data gathered during the interview process for recurring themes. I expected city council members to have differing interpretations with regard to the definitions of environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainable development. Due to the character of the study, all interview responses were given equal value during this discovery phase. Thus, the findings described each theme as it corresponded to influential factors of environmental policy decisions.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Advocacy coalition framework:* “Views policy as translations of beliefs from competing coalitions; . . . expert-based information affects policy indirectly by slowly altering the beliefs of policy actors” (Weible, 2008, p. 619).

*Agenda:* “Set of issues that are most salient to citizens and voters” (Weible et al., 2009, p. 782).

*Anthropocene*: “Relating to or denoting the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment” (Oxford, 2013, para. 1).

*Elite*: “Persons who are leaders or experts in a community, usually those in powerful positions” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 147).

*Epoche*: “To refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Patton, 2002, p. 484).

*Governance*: “Processes through which collective goals are defined and pursued in which the state (or government) is not necessarily the only or most important actor” (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006, p. 144).

*Policy network*: “Relationships among actors, from a variety of affiliations, who attempt to influence the processes and outcomes in a policy subsystem” (Weible, 2005, p. 461).

*Policy subsystem*: “Semiautonomous decision-making networks of policy participants that focus on a particular policy issue usually within a geographic boundary” (Weible, 2008, p. 621).

*Rational choice theory*: “Explain[s] political outcomes based on a small number of assumptions and deductive reasoning; . . . actors are self-interested . . . and maximise their utility in accordance with their preferences” (Grundig, 2009, p. 747).

*Recycling*: “The process by which materials otherwise destined for disposal are collected, processed, and remanufactured or reused” (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [USEPA], 1995, p. 6-1).

*Sustainable development*: “Meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987, para.1).

### **Assumptions**

The primary assumptions of this phenomenological study involved the reliance on honest feedback from participants and my ability as the researcher to bracket all personal biases. I expected that all responses to interview questions would reflect accurate details, attitudes, and belief systems of each participant. I also assumed that participants relied on their own experiences and did not reflect on others’ experiences previously described to them. Discovery of the true essence of the phenomenon only occurred with such honest feedback. Finally, I demonstrated a positive effort to place all preconceived notions and personal biases aside prior to conducting interviews and analyzing the data through the practical method of bracketing.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Qualitative investigation contends with delimitations. The investigation focused on the geographical area contained within the boundaries of CVAG. Policy discussions considered only environmental regulations, which respective city council members had a role in developing and implementing. The scope was restricted to environmental policy in an effort to answer the research questions. The criterion sampling method used to select study participants revealed delimitation due to the exclusion of junior city council members. In accordance with the chosen method, the results of the study only apply directly to the targeted region.

### **Limitations**

Researchers using qualitative methods must manage certain limitations. Factors considered during policy development not specifically addressed in this study may be noted as limitations. The number and weight of factors discovered were totally dependent upon the perspective of the city council members participating in interview sessions and those who provided questionnaire responses. The low participation rate of city council members incurred during this qualitative investigation added a significant limitation; I discuss this topic further within Chapters 4 and 5.

The interview process presented some challenges. I had no prior experience with conducting formal interviews, thus the reason for the selection of focused interviews. This option placed significance on the quality of participant responses and allowed considerable leeway for follow-on questions. Additionally, participant schedules and availability restricted the time frame allowed for data collection.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study results were expected to provide a narrow look into environmental policy development as well as factors such as political and religious affiliations, level of environmental concern, and knowledge of ecological literacy considered by city council members during the decision-making process. Literature did not present an adequate qualitative investigation of direct experiences or factors that may influence results of environmental policy decision making by municipal officials in this region. Study findings provided insight into relevant factors of environmental policy discussion and enhanced awareness of a push for more sustainable practices; thus, the study results filled

a gap in the literature regarding specific municipal policy influences as reported by participants.

### **Social Change**

Positive social change may come about as city council members and relevant public officials in this and other regions benefit from the study's findings. With a fresh perspective or renewed understanding of environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainability, these critical personnel have the opportunity to improve current recycling programs and associated policies within their own communities. Environmental policies create social change due to the nature of newly enacted regulations and associated behavioral changes that must accompany these policy actions.

Newly enacted environmental policies also generate a sense of awareness and potential consequences. These policies guide people and encourage them to become more ecologically literate. Lessons learned may be applied to multiple environmental objectives. Just as a sustained level of solid waste diversion relieves burdens placed on existing landfill capacity, diversion also plays a substantial role in reducing GHGs concentrated within the earth's atmosphere (EPA, 2011). Educating communities on this particular initiative allows for advancement in other environmental realms. Water conservation, use of alternative energy sources, and greater levels of pollution prevention soon follow as city officials strive to achieve sustainability.

### **Summary**

This chapter offered an overview of the study and its potential impact on Southern California's Coachella Valley region. Introductions to the concepts of environmental

concern, ecological literacy, and sustainability came together with the ACF. The purpose of this study and research questions appropriately focused on factors possibly considered during environmental policy discussions. The concepts of ACF in contrast with RCT outlined the study's framework; operational definitions gave brief explanations of significant terms. Assumptions and limitations of the study along with the significance of the study closed out the first chapter.

The remaining chapters solidify the importance of this particular investigation. In Chapter 2, I reflect on previous literature regarding environmental policies, advocacy coalitions, and rational choice as well as the policy process and city council members' role within that process. Chapter 3 contains an explanation of the optimal research method chosen for such an investigation. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of the participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis process, which leads to the study findings. Chapter 5 concludes the study write-up with an interpretation of the results, recommendations for further research, and implications related to positive social change.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Specific policy responsibilities remain with municipal governments as they strive to create thriving communities. For this reason, an understanding of the lived experiences and factors considered during policy discussions throughout the decision-making process may be critical elements within the process. As the first line of defense against global climate change, municipal officials carry a significant obligation to their community that also extends beyond community boundaries.

Elected public officials represent the community and have a responsibility to work toward the common good. The overall policy process includes the crucial component of communication with the affected citizen base (Adams, 2004; Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006; Biebricher, 2011; Daley, 2008; Jones, 2010; Montesinos & Brusca, 2009; Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011). Previous studies suggested the criticality of consistency in environmental policies, particularly recycling programs (Alibeli & White, 2011) and the relative importance of action at the local level (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Dellinger, 2013; Goleman et al., 2012; Matthew & Hammill, 2009). In this study, I investigated and reported on the predominant factors considered during the environmental policy process within member cities of CVAG.

Chapter 2 begins with an overview of local government authority, city council composition and responsibilities, and the public policy process, and then delves into ACF and RCT. Several factors that may influence city council decisions follow in the discussion. The next sections revolve around environmental governance and concepts of

environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainability. More specifically, recycling program options provide an example of applicable policy discussion. Qualitative methods presented in the literature follow, with the gap noticed closing out the chapter.

### **Literature Selection**

The majority of literature reviewed concerns local government structure and the policy process. The relevant structure provides the foundation of city council member authority and responsibility. This study warranted an understanding of multiple aspects of the policy process. As mentioned in the previous chapter, ACF and RCT provided the basis for the investigation along with three notable environmental concepts. Sustainability, ecological literacy, and environmental concern might associate to city council member attitudes; therefore, the study might identify situations in which these specific concepts influenced policy decisions.

I obtained literature from peer-reviewed journals from databases such as Political Science Complete, ProQuest Central, and Academic Search Complete. The bulk of selected literature reflects scholarly works published over the last 7 years. Search strings used to find related literature included but were not limited to *city council, environmental policy, policy process, advocacy coalition framework, rational choice theory, environmental concern, ecological literacy, sustainability, recycling programs, recycling policies, policy implementation, policy factors, public participation, environmental governance, policy development, sustainable development, and phenomenological investigation.*



## **Local Government**

Each level of government reserves certain rights and powers, from federal to state to municipal. Jurisdictional boundaries delineate responsibilities and governmental authority (Kingdon, 2011). The authority and powers extended to local governments provide greater stability to the existing national democratic system. Authoritative proximity to the community being affected provides a greater chance of meeting the direct needs of its citizen base (Chandler, 2010; Institute for Local Government, 2009).

Municipalities within California adhere to certain agency powers and limitations. The California Constitution designates some of their powers; regulatory power relates to “public health, safety, and welfare” (Institute for Local Government, 2012, p. 1). Regulations issued at the local level cannot conflict with state or federal general laws. Limitations of municipal governance may also concern rights established by Amendments (i.e., First, Fourth, Fifth, and Fourteenth) to the U.S. Constitution (Institute for Local Government, 2012).

Local governments represent independent entities led by either a council-manager or mayor-council form of government. The majority of municipalities within the United States use one of these two forms. The chosen political structure holds significant influence on policy outputs as well as the community’s socioeconomic status. Reported variances in output and status correlate with different interpretations of public opinion and community needs (DeSantis & Renner, 2002). Elections for small city councils remain nonpartisan in most U.S. cities; seven members make up an average-sized city council (Blair & Janousek, 2014).

Municipal officials are elected leaders. The roles and responsibilities associated with election to a city council involve policy development, decision making, and policy implementation. Montesinos and Brusca (2009) reported a high level of awareness on the part of city council members regarding the significance of their roles, specifically with respect to proactive environmental policies. Recent literature denoted changes in local government officials' perspective on their role; they have shifted from regarding themselves as simply problem fixers to seeing themselves as collaborators seeking insight from subject matter experts to discover solutions for community issues. The collaborative process involves stakeholders from multiple arenas (Frederickson & O'Leary, 2014).

### **Council-Manager**

Public officials developed the council-manager form of governance as a form of local government used to combat corruption and inadequacies during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This form actually incorporated two previous forms, mayoral and commission; the council-manager structure resolved the faults of the previous forms. Supporters of the council-manager form also touted centralization of supervisory responsibilities with the manager and separation of representative duties in an elected council (DeSantis & Renner, 2002). The council-manager form of governance emphasizes the selection of a city manager by the city council based on merit (Frederickson & O'Leary, 2014). Citizens elect city council members on an alternating schedule. Selection of the mayor comes from the elected body of city council members; the mayor serves a specified term in that role (Whitaker & DeHoog, 1991). All municipalities within CVAG use the

council-manager form of government, with five city council members and one of those members selected to fill the role of mayor.

### **Mayor-Council**

Larger cities within the United States opt to use the mayor-council form of local government. Divergent from that of council-manager, the mayor holds primary responsibility for administrative actions as well as the city's budget. Citizens elect the mayoral position separately from that of the city council members (DeSantis & Renner, 2002).

### **City Administration**

City managers oversee the administrative staff as well as the city's budget under the council-manager form of government. The city manager relies on expertise and remains neutral by "focusing on the functionality of the city system while answering to and supporting the policies and objectives of the elected representatives" (Blair & Janousek, 2014, p. 486). As the administrative head, a city manager also serves in a key role regarding day-to-day operation of city activities, economic development, mission accomplishment, city performance, policy development, and fiscal sustainability (Blair & Janousek, 2014). Each municipality within CVAG employs a city manager who serves at the will of the city council.

Several departments comprise the basic city organizational chart. Experts in their field serve as the division heads of departments such as public works, finance, human resources, planning, and economic development. Leaders within the city staff function as catalysts for collaboration (O'Leary, 2014). For example, planning directors and their

staff have become involved with land use and transportation decisions, as well as the integration of climate action plans in more recent years (Bassett & Shandas, 2010).

Functions within economic development tie directly to planning and also play a key role in a city's fiscal portrait. Each department works with the others to create the city system.

### **Commissions and Boards**

Cities create either commissions or boards via a resolution or ordinance; the pertinent regulation assigns specific authority. Members of commissions serve in an advisory role on relevant topics. For example, a planning commission reviews courses of action regarding planning issues in an effort to provide feedback prior to final outcomes being made public by the city council. Commissions and boards also provide an opportunity for the involvement of additional community members within the local government process (Institute for Local Government, 2009).

### **Boundaries**

Decisions made by city council members have the potential to influence actions and decisions in neighboring communities. A study of 1,417 local government officials was conducted to garner input on experiences of collaboration and working with others outside their immediate boundaries. Results indicated that these officials represented groups based on implicit or explicit mandates or adoption of collaboration as a management strategy. Eight-six percent of these local government officials felt collaboration was the right thing to do as a means to align with community values and expectations regarding how leaders spend taxpayer monies. Collaboration signified an effective approach to enhancing performance and accomplishing goals; more complex

public issues required multiple perspectives and the sharing of those ideas. Collaboration also allowed these local government officials to build alliances, which improved commitment to strategies and yielded more sustainable results (O’Leary, 2014).

### **Public Policy**

The field of public policy does not follow a stringent set of rules; flexibility allows government officials to address concerns as needed. Policy ideas may come from a plethora of sources, depending upon the type of issue (Kingdon, 2011). A movement from local government to a more open, adaptive style of local governance improves efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery in addition to providing more candid and responsible public leadership. The idea of good governance by public officials involves being true to the citizens whom they represent (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006; Biebricher, 2011; Montesinos & Brusca, 2009). In general practice, principles and values heavily influence governance (Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009).

While the exact definition of governance remains somewhat elastic and open to interpretation, the concept correlates with public good. Public goods are ideally nonrivalrous and nonexcludable. This means that one citizen’s consumption of a good does not reduce the benefit afforded another citizen of that same good (Morrell, 2009). Examples include unbiased public leadership, clean water, safe food, and inviting public areas. These examples depict the public good referred to when discussing governance.

Standard elements of governance include images, policy instruments, and policy action. Images refer to models, facts, assumptions, and objectives, which relate to why and how the process of governance addresses policy concerns. Policy instruments

represent the tools used by governing bodies to implement newly accepted policies. Finally, the implementation of policies occurs during the action phase of the policy process (Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009).

### **Policy Process**

Policy development involves at least four stages or processes. First, an agenda outlines items as a series of possible alternatives or courses of action. Discussions ensue, and council members vote to select one alternative or course of action. The final process entails implementation of the selected alternative (Kingdon, 2011). This brief description depicts the stages in their simplest form. The creation and implementation of public policy involves elaborate relationships among all parties, ranging from public officials to engaged citizens (Weaver-Hightower, 2013).

Learning throughout the policy process refers to the use of subject matter experts and accumulation of scientific knowledge, which may indirectly or directly affect policy decisions. Belief systems of public officials may change as learning proceeds. Informed predictions from scientists often represent significant factors (Weible, 2008), particularly when dealing with environmental policy decisions.

**Public meetings.** Municipalities within California hold open meetings in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act. The Act specifies that all decision making will take place in an open, public arena and outlines explicit rights of community members (Institute for Local Government, 2009). Public meetings offer the community an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and open a strategic line of communication with city council members. Residents have a chance to voice concerns or

support on impending policy issues (Adams, 2004) with a principal goal of influencing city council votes. Often, public meetings allow the community to encourage cooperation regarding unpopular opinions (Adams, 2004). For example, many environmental policies have benefits and drawbacks that may divide the support of the community. Public officials backing these environmental initiatives need members of the community with the same opinion to speak up in public meetings (Adams, 2004). This open line of communication may enhance awareness and garner further support and clarification of the policy being discussed. Political decisions often follow public opinion (Barker & Bearce, 2012). Ultimately, the cooperation garnered from the community for a particular environmental policy determines its effectiveness (Jones, 2010).

**Agenda setting.** Initiatives placed on municipal policy agendas for discussion frequently represent a response to problems noted within the community. Kingdon (2011) provided a three-stream process at the federal level involving the recognition of a problem, development of policy proposals, and political outcomes (Kingdon, 2011). The additional streams of policies and politics may also influence agenda setting at the municipal level. Studies posited that dominant coalitions may display a high degree of control over agenda item selection (Weible et al., 2009).

Aside from agenda items, alternative items exist at a secondary level. Alternatives represent various methods from which to approach a policy issue (Kingdon, 2011). For example, an environmental policy concerning recycling may offer a particular incentive to residents and businesses such as a tax credit for a certain level of participation or fines for nonparticipation.

As mentioned, the policy process begins with identification of an issue that requires action. Problem recognition may often directly result from feedback obtained from the community during public meetings or other public comment opportunity. Community enthusiasm for or unwillingness to accept potential policy changes may play a significant role in a city council member's decision to support or reject an agenda item (Pralle, 2009). Citizens' initiatives are a hybrid instrument, which may get items placed on the agenda. These initiatives often result from proactive individuals working with the local government or other neighborhood agencies; these engaged citizens show genuine concern about an issue and work toward a positive change in the community (Bakker et al., 2012).

An unexpected change in a tracked indicator or gathering of knowledge by a policy specialist characterizes other ways to recognize a potential policy issue (Kingdon, 2011). Performance indicators track a variety of items such as public services provided (e.g., street cleaning, tree trimming) and quality of life concerns (e.g., healthcare, education; Montesinos & Brusca, 2009). In this instance, specific sustainability and environmental indicators may warrant policy changes or implementations of new policies to counteract negative results.

Policy specialists generally work in the field that the policy affects. Federal-level policy specialists include congressional staffers, special interest groups, and academics (Kingdon, 2011). At the municipal level, policy specialists include personnel in supportive roles and division offices. These subject matter experts relay facts pertinent to current events and issues (Pellizzoni, 2011), make policy recommendations, maintain



records, and determine fiscal impacts of policy alternatives (Institute for Local Government, 2009).

The specific political agenda of each party affiliation may also play a role in municipal policy agendas. The mood sensed at the national level regarding certain policy items (Kingdon, 2011; Pralle, 2009) has a tendency to flow down to states and local governments. The possibility exists that special interest groups may also play a role in setting policy agenda in larger municipalities.

Finally, restrictions of agenda items often come into play in the form of budget constraints. Policies that bear greater expense of implementation may fall lower in priority and not make the cut for discussion on a session agenda, while those of lower cost rise to the top (Kingdon, 2011). Budgets must align with the projected revenue streams and funding availability based upon planned expenditures.

### **Policy Frameworks**

Environmental governance establishes and realizes goals related to eco-friendly policies that serve as a foundation to creating sustainable communities. In this study, I took a general look at ACF and applied it to environmentally-conscious decisions; I used RCT to provide a contrasting view. Discussions on environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainable development included additional concepts that further explained perceptions with regard to environmental policies.

### **Advocacy Coalition**

Intense conflicts regarding complicated policy concerns led to the development of ACF (Weible, 2005). The ACF also filled a gap in theoretical research and exposed the

suggestive role that science and other technical information plays in the policy process (Weible et al., 2009). Subject matter experts serve as valuable resources by organizing ideologies into strategic arguments that defend against adversaries and promote specific viewpoints. These viewpoints also attract attention to overlapping policy subsystems (Weible, 2008).

**Assumptions.** ACF includes many assumptions. As the most basic assumption, personal beliefs remain the primary factor behind political actions. ACF is modeled hierarchically with three tiers containing an explanation of relevant belief systems. The top tier represents deep core beliefs; these cover the broadest spectrum of an individual's firmly established beliefs and include liberal views as a good example. Policy core beliefs are within the middle range and include a more moderate span of beliefs such as practicality within a policy subsystem. Finally, secondary beliefs represent an individual's most practical viewpoints that are derived from observation at a much more narrow scope. Policy core beliefs may adjust as a result of new experiences; however, deep core beliefs do not readily change. Researchers have presented how the three-tiered model of ACF may influence secondary beliefs causing them to adjust over the course of time through new experiences (Weible et al., 2009).

Another assumption of ACF involves stakeholders who group together due to mutual policy core beliefs. These mutual beliefs provide the foundation of the coalition structure and justification for use in attempts to influence policy to accomplish collective goals. A sense of mistrust exists for individuals outside the coalition who hold differing policy core beliefs; interactions may take on an adversarial nature. Coalition members

trustingly coordinate with one another in an effort to solidify strategies used to shape policy development (Weible, 2005). Such connections enhance learning among coalition members (Weible, 2008), which also reinforces policy and deep core beliefs (Weible et al., 2009).

Coalition members do not necessarily interact on a regular basis. Communication and coordination may vary based on each member's specific beliefs or resources. Two types of members are auxiliary and principal. Auxiliary coalition members do not get as involved with coalition business and may only interact with a select few within the coalition. However, the principal coalition members bear the responsibility of coordinating activities and providing essential leadership (Weible, 2008). Previous studies suggested evidence of relatively stable coalition membership, yet defection did occur (Weible et al., 2009).

Early literature on coalition formation posited member motivation as that of holding a public position without consideration of policy preference. This stance on public positions became the premise for later models of coalition formation. Political parties will not form coalitions with other parties of differing policy perspectives, and the chance of coalition formation depends upon the number of respective parties (Serritzlew, Blom-Hansen, & Skjaeveland, 2010). Research findings also indicated that shared ideologies represent a strong indicator for developing policy networks (Weible, 2005).

Serritzlew et al (2010) impressed the difficulty in analyzing coalition formation due to the "multi-dimensional nature of politics" (p. 861). Additionally, advocacy coalitions may operate simultaneously within both national and international political

realms. This distribution of power arises from varying authoritative bodies who demonstrate expertise and morality as they work to influence aspects of governance to include environmental policy (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006).

**Paths to change.** The study of policy subsystems through ACF has led to four paths that are used to implement policy changes. The first path involves occurrences external to the subsystem such as the consequence of a change in public opinion or economic situation. Learning from new experiences or accumulating a greater knowledge base of policy objectives describes the second path. The third path encompasses events that occur on an internal level within the policy subsystem. Finally, negotiations between coalitions represent the fourth path to policy change (Weible et al., 2009). All ACF paths to change described might apply to municipal policy and city council member actions.

**ACF in action.** Pralle (2009) focused on a “climate change advocacy community” (p. 794) as a means to readily influence the prospect of keeping climate initiatives as primary items on policy agendas. Scholars continued to impress the importance of climate change and relative impact that a multilevel perspective can have on negating its effects. Studies directed focus toward the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives’ (ICLEI) program Cities for Climate Protection (CPP), a proactive network of municipal governments that work toward combating the negative effects of climate change. Member cities make commitments toward GHG emission reductions and strive to reach five pre-determined milestones that promote planning in coordination with climate change policies (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006; Wheeler, 2008).

An element of advocacy coalitions may also involve partners from the private sector. Sinclair (2011) conducted a case study to ascertain the influence of the private sector on local policy making in Scotland. Findings resulted in a strong preference for consensus during decision making and reluctance to make communities aware of any disagreements. On several occasions, partner value resulted from the quality input provided and novel ideas that resulted in policy improvements. This fact noted them as a solid source of feedback but not necessarily equal partners in the decision-making process (Sinclair, 2011).

Weible's (2005) case study concerning marine life protection in California illustrated a real-world example of ACF in action. A team of scientists working with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) developed a listing of recommended sites for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) along California's coast. After months of meetings and pushback from local officials, CDFG aborted the plan. CDFG initiated the effort again the following year and used seven working groups made up of 14 to 18 stakeholders each. Participants within the working groups responded to a questionnaire developed to ascertain their beliefs on the effectiveness of MPAs and to whom they may coordinate with on MPA issues. Results confirmed that stakeholders are more likely to interact and rely on those with similar policy core beliefs. In this instance, two advocacy coalitions formed: one pro-MPA and one anti-MPA. Composition of both coalitions included government officials at varying levels, researchers, environmental interest groups, and commercial parties. Survey responses also expressed a level of distrust of the opposing coalition members' opinions (Weible, 2005).

**Lessons learned.** Scholars have used ACF as their framework for over 20 years. A review of previous studies found the majority concerned with environmental policies, yet this particular framework also relates to other social, economic, and health issues. Most cases did not specify data collection methods used in the studies, which left the investigative process open to options ranging from interviews to questionnaires or simple observation (Weible et al., 2009).

Weible et al (2009) found that many studies overlooked lesser-known details of ACF such as the “devil shift” (p. 132). The devil shift provides an explanation of how coalition members may embellish facts about an opponent’s motives or behavior to gain an advantage. Political viewpoints are often on opposite ends of the spectrum when this occurs (Weible et al., 2009).

### **Rational Choice**

RCT offers a contrast to the conceptual framework of advocacy coalition. Principle theorists likened rational choice to the principal-agent problem. Efforts focused on getting the agent to act in the best interest of the principal, and the creation of agent incentives began (Bevir, 2011). Agents maintain three characteristics: “motivated exclusively by the improvement of their own utility; . . . possess perfect knowledge, so they can identify what best enhances their utility; and . . . have unlimited cognitive capacity” (Paavola, 2008, p. 646). Seminal theorists resolved how all things have value regardless of their practical usefulness (Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009). Predictions from RCT involve optimization of the expected utility of all decision options (Hewig et al., 2011).

The foundations of political decisions made using the rational choice model are based primarily on deductive reasoning and practical assumptions of self-interest and utility maximization (Grundig, 2009). Thus, decisions concerning environmental governance require no scientific support or potential cost and environmental assessment (Paavola, 2008). Values and beliefs do not outweigh interests and resources when it comes to such decisive actions. Rational choice may also suggest informal views in that often opinions still reflect egotism even after careful consideration (Shwom, Bidwell, Dan, & Dietz, 2010). The possibility also exists for users of RCT to make a decision that inflicts punishment on others even if it also decreases their reward. Scientists attributed this deviation from RCT to negative emotional markers (Hewig et al., 2011).

Bounded rationality maintains that all possible outcomes, whether positive or negative, cannot be known with certainty. In this instance, choices fulfill current requirements and fit the circumstances. The reasoning behind an action follows in sequence to the action (Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009). Systematic errors may also occur when the decision maker forecasts the anticipated utility of each option. Actors may overestimate the utility of an outcome based purely on intuitive judgments (Kahneman & Thaler, 2006). Thus, the act of voting to make a selection from possible outcomes characterizes the preferences of individuals (Arrow, 1950) and may represent individual biases due to memories of prior decisions (Kahneman & Thaler, 2006).

**Criticism and challenges.** Critics of RCT maintain accountability, external norms, and internal consistency as possible issues. Studies based such arguments around the practicality of internal consistency and underlying motives or objectives of the

decision maker. For example, the limited set of alternatives available to a decision maker might create these consistency issues. Personal values and preferences represent external norms that may bear weight toward a certain choice (Bhattacharyya, Pattanaik, & Yongsheng, 2011; Bossert & Suzumura, 2011). Given the possibilities, can citizens rely on elected policy makers to act unselfishly and make decisions for the common good rather than maximizing their own utility when using RCT?

Other challenges exist with using RCT in environmental policy decisions. Members of the community might wonder why policies that provide a significant benefit remain in a dormant state (Paavola, 2008), while other less important policies are implemented. Attainment of perfect knowledge regarding environmental impact may not hold true, which further delays policy action. Most notably, the exclusion of scientific support might cause unforeseen issues with environmental policy discussions.

**RCT in action.** In a study on political decision making, authors employed RCT as expected utility theory in contrast to prospect theory. Prospect theory allows the decision maker to consider whether a decision will result in either a gain or loss, while expected utility includes the consideration of risk aversion. Thirty-two of the study participants included politicians and bureaucrats with expertise in municipal spending and economic policies. Their questionnaire responses were compared to economics students attending university; the authors classified this group as nonexperts. Questionnaires contained hypothetical problems related to “political candidates and public referenda” (Fatas, Neugebauer, & Tamborero, 2007, p. 172). Respondents were asked to provide the actual decision they would have made in real world scenarios. Study



findings reported the expert group did not appear exempt to the positive or negative framing of each problem under assessment. However, expert responses delineated from nonexperts for questions regarding risk-based decisions. The final results were inconclusive and noted that expertise and culture only partially influence political decisions (Fatas et al., 2007).

### **Influential Factors**

This study determined the various influential factors considered by city council members when making environmental policy decisions. This investigation also explored measurements of the relative weight and bearing on final policy decisions for all influential factors revealed. The definition of influence itself may have several dimensions in that it involves getting “others to act, think, or feel as one intends” (Weaver-Hightower, 2013, p. 3) possibly by using persuasion, deceit, or coercion. This literature review did not take into account all possible influential factors, as some remain unknown, but focused on the most common influences anticipated from the readings.

City council members serve a dual role as both political representatives and citizens of the community in which they reside. Therefore, environmental initiatives affect city council members on both a professional and personal level. During the respective decision-making process, factors considered may include cost-benefit, social benefit, legality and compliance with regulations, political philosophy, and so on. These and other factors bear different weights, thus influencing decisions on varying levels.

A similar example from the literature involved Tummers, Steijn, and Bekkers’ (2012) study of healthcare professionals using three factors: policy content, context, and

personality. All hypotheses targeted the willingness to implement new policy. The authors discovered “the three meaningless factors (societal, client and personal) have the strongest influence on willingness to change” (Tummers et al., 2012, p. 742) and subsequent implementation of new policy. A suggestion for future research included a study of multiple factors that may provide evidence of public professionals’ willingness or resistance toward novel policy development and effective implementation (Tummers et al., 2012). This same process may apply to city council members while also considering personality and other significant factors.

### **Political Affiliation**

Politicians ranging from congressional representatives to city council members may align with a particular political party. Perhaps as a result of parental party preference, party identification begins to develop during youth. Although, affiliation remains a choice that may change as an individual evaluates party positions. At the same time, party affiliation influences political stances on policy and voting decisions (Franklin & Jackson, 1983) and continues to result in varying ideologies and perspectives on sustainability (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). Overall, a significant function of political parties remains the articulation and representation of the interests of the broad base of citizenry (Dalton, 2009).

Liberal and conservative are words that describe political party philosophies, Democratic and Republican, respectively, in addition to persons who ascribe to those belief systems. Predominantly, either social or economic issues represent interpretations of these terms (Conover & Feldman, 1981; Dalton, 2009). Conover and Feldman (1981)

conducted a study to assess self-identification with regard to liberal and conservative viewpoints. Participants who identified themselves as conservative spoke of fiscal and foreign policies, while liberals focused on change and social policies. Results indicated participant evaluations of both liberal and conservative ideals conveyed aspects of self-identification, yet each belief system did not show a strong negative relationship to the other (Conover & Feldman, 1981). Motivations for political identification might range from strictly egoism to dramatic altruism (Munger, 2008); these traits relate to components of environmental concern discussed later in this chapter.

When speaking specifically about environmental policies, conservatives and liberals express differing beliefs. Conservatives often present a negative attitude and object to the enhancement of policies such as mandatory recycling programs. Liberals more likely believe that recycling policies are a first step toward solving environmental problems and are an important aspect of sustainable development (Lybecker et al., 2013). Party lines do not change the fact that politicians make attempts to maximize favorable votes and back policy decisions respective of their supporting constituents (Montesinos & Brusca, 2009).

The overall concept of recycling represents ideas found in each philosophy as conveyed in the following excerpt:

Conservative values supported by recycling include: first, that recycling involves the reuse of resources, potentially reducing the cost of goods leading to market efficiency; second, recycling reduces the need for additional landfills and as such demonstrates governmental fiscal responsibility; finally, the individual act of

recycling is conservative in that it exhibits individual moral responsibility.

(Lybecker et al., 2013, p. 317)

Acting on behalf of the common good, taking steps to combat climate change, and reducing energy consumption signifies the more liberal values of an engaged citizen (Lybecker et al., 2013) despite political affiliation.

The environmentalist movement beginning in the late 1970s brought with it a new political perspective through the emergence of green parties worldwide. Members developed new ideologies and ways to affect environmental problems faced by “advanced industrial democracies” (Dalton, 2009, p. 161). This ideology exerted considerable influence on the incorporation of environmental issues into both conservative and liberal philosophies. However, contradictions still exist as to the balance between economic growth and environmental protection (Dalton, 2009).

### **Sociotropic Thinking**

The definition of sociotropy refers to an excessive amount of importance placed on relationships rather than personal autonomy. Sociotropic behavior might associate with group identification, membership, or comparison. Group identification implies that a person’s self-image aligns with the persona of the specific group. Group membership might take on the literal meaning or be a more subjective version where an individual places emphasis on belonging to a particular group. Group comparison often corresponds to judgments of economic standing between contextual groups. Groups have a greater likelihood of promoting political responsibility (Mutz & Mondak, 1997). In the instance

of this study, sociotropic thinking may influence actions based on political affiliation or other group designation to which the city council member feels a part.

### **Religious Views**

The U.S. Constitution directs the interworkings of the federal government. As a matter of point, a statement involving Congress and rule making merely implies the separation of church and state. A common misconception exists in that the U.S. Constitution states this fact directly. What is included in the *Bill of Rights* is the freedom of religion and relief from persecution based on personal religious views (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

Christian end-times theologians view policy decisions from a different perspective (Barker & Bearce, 2012). For example, discussions of environmental protection and sustainability represent unnecessary ideals due to the timing factor. Such views revolve around the second coming and deterioration of the earth prior to this occurrence. The belief exists that the current generation does not need to plan for future generations' extended life on earth due to an unyielding expectation that life on earth will cease sooner rather than later. Interpretations of Biblical scripture regarding earthly dominion have further discarded environmental protection initiatives. Conversely, not all scholars agree with this conclusion and use the same scripture to support environmental concern. Given this scenario, both Republicans and Democrats might feel restricted and choose not to support environmental policies (Barker & Bearce, 2012).

## **Cost-Benefit**

Cost-benefit analysis refers to economic conditions and how the potential policy will affect both the short and long-term fiscal situations. Questions address cost effectiveness, benefits realized, and cost justification (Kingdon, 2011). Cost-benefit analysis considers policy implications from both the standpoint of the municipality as well as the community-at-large. Decisions made in a relatively quick time frame do not allow for adequate cost-benefit analysis (Shwom et al., 2010).

As with any policy decision, applicable social costs bear some weight. Cost-benefit scenarios not only inform city council members; each situation also influences compliance and cooperation within the citizen base. Benefits directly related to environmental policies include increased cleanliness due to a reduction in waste disposal, better air quality due to odor reduction, and conservation of the natural environment for enjoyment by future generations (Jones, 2010).

Generally speaking, implementation of environmental policies might bear considerable expense in the short term. Payback periods vary depending upon the exact initiative and support garnered from the citizen base. Given this information, the current economic situation often drives the amount of support offered for environmental policies (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011).

## **Public Opinion and Participation**

Public opinion and community participation are policy elements that carry more emphasis now than in previous decades (Shwom et al., 2010) and denote an important aspect of policy consideration and support by council members (Kingdon, 2011). Policies

meeting citizen preferences sustain more support and compliance; this level of community support holds true particularly for environmental policies (Daley, 2008; Jones, 2010; Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011). In fact, the encouragement of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) increases public participation. Citizen actions might range from advisory board service and public notice response to public hearing attendance (Daley, 2008).

Public opinion has the potential to positively or negatively impact policy decisions. Popular attitudes have the tendency to place items on the agenda for discussion, while disapproving views might attempt to constrain governmental action. Although, interpretive problems can result due to the specificity of opinions expressed during such communication; vagueness and not identifying an acceptable course of action might detract from an opinion and its consideration by the respective governing body (Kingdon, 2011). This inattention to detail might also lead to inaccurate assumptions made by public officials who in turn cast votes for or against policies that do not meet constituent expectations. Political elites, such as city council members, might potentially act on biased or incomplete information due its accessibility (Miler, 2009).

The following characterizations demonstrate ways to measure the effectiveness of public participation: “1) altering outcomes of a decision-making process either by reducing conflict or achieving public goals, and 2) improved citizen satisfaction with the decision-making process” (Daley, 2008, p. 22). The weight given to public opinion by each city council member can have a substantial impact on final policy decisions.

## **Environmental Governance**

Environmental policies, particularly those related to climate change, represent some of the most problematic decisions due to the uncertainty implied and a lack of consensus regarding relevant facts. Stakeholders at all levels view environmental policies from varying perspectives. During the Bush administration from 2001-2008, the United States made little effort to fully support the *Kyoto Protocol*. This inaction resulted in intense climate debates between those who supported environmental policies and those who preferred to concentrate on other policy issues (Fletcher, 2009).

With support of the current administration, environmental policies will continue to be at the forefront of political discussions. President Obama made it clear that he adamantly promotes progressive policies and programs that enhance the sustainability of the earth and all it entails (White House, 2013). He emphasized how current civilizations have a moral obligation to ensure a healthy planet for generations to come. From cutting carbon pollution and increasing investment in alternative energy to improving fuel economy and strengthening communities across the nation, Obama pledged to make the United States an innovator in the fight against the negative effects of climate change (White House, 2013) rather than maintaining its consistent laggard status (Grundig, 2009).

In concert with President Obama's renewed climate plan, municipal governments can make significant impacts within their respective boundaries by taking a proactive approach to combating climate change at the local level. A multilevel perspective that works up from local to state to national might signify the most effective way for the United States to address climate change. This multilevel perspective more accurately



demonstrates the links between the political, economic, and social aspects of environmental governance. More specifically, it helps to depict how recycling policies and programs signify an important first step in reducing GHG emissions by diverting solid waste from landfills; local governments maintain primary authority over this function (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006).

The *Brundtland Report* emphasized action at the municipal level due to population projections of urban areas (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The Commission recommended cities serve as the focus of sustainable development. Scholars presented four reasons linked to this suggestion. First, cities consistently use the most energy and produce the most waste. Next, cities already work toward sustainable initiatives that aid in the reduction of the negative effects of climate change within their boundaries. Third, city officials can potentially influence a wide range of audiences from the local community reaching all the way to state and national levels by building strategic partnerships. Lastly, existing initiatives used by cities might function as a basis for further experimentation at multiple levels (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2006; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005).

### **Policy Instruments**

Environmental policies are either incentive-based or regulatory in nature. Incentive-based or market-based policy instruments enact few constraints and leave environmental participatory decisions to each individual. Examples include subsidies, deposit refunds, and some tax policies. Regulatory or command instruments impose strict rules for compliance and enforcement of environmental policies (Jones et al., 2009).

The use of incentive-based or regulatory policies remains dependent upon the citizen base and elected city council members. Studies that focused on the economic impact showed incentive-based approaches as more effective for longer periods of time than regulations that may propose strict rules. However, citizens seem to prefer regulatory methods for the implementation of environmental policies (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011). City council members have the responsibility of selecting the most feasible option for the affected community.

### **Policy Attitudes**

In general, individuals make their own determinations using relevant knowledge accumulated over the course of their life. Environmental attitudes and perspectives may also vary based on several demographic characteristics. Previous studies regarding federal environmental spending and public awareness reported a majority of participants felt too little emphasis was placed on environmental initiatives (Konisky, Milyo, & Richardson, 2008; Shwom et al., 2010).

Environmental citizenship recognizes that self-centered behavior is not in the best interest of the natural environment. A more conscious commitment and effort to enhance the common good persists (Dunlap, 2007; Hobson, 2013). Green governmentality, coined as a new approach to connect government with environmental citizenship, represents the focus on contemporary sustainability issues and interactions among citizens, their governments, and the natural environment. Examples include carbon off-sets, recycling programs, and other climate change initiatives (Hobson, 2013).

When considering environmental policy attitudes, studies suggested that even small behavioral changes made by individuals can lead to significant impacts (Hobson, 2013) and garner support for community action. The synergy created by the few ultimately spreads to the many. While this may be true, inconsistencies and resistance to environmental policies might create challenges that hamper implementation efforts and subsequent compliance (Jones et al., 2009).

**Environmental concern.** Environmental concern represents the first aspect of policy attitudes to emerge in research. Environmental concern characterizes an individual's awareness of and willingness to support resolutions to environmental issues (Alibeli & White, 2011; Konisky et al., 2008; Stern & Dietz, 1994). A more narrative description follows:

Justification for environmental concern should be found on reasons of a more spiritual nature like those that inspired early environmentalism, a movement that combined a predominantly ecocentric perspective with an attempt to give a renewed answer to people's deep hunger to belong to a community and have a place in it. (Seghezzo, 2009, p. 543)

Empirical research identified the components of environmental concern as social altruism and biospheric values, in addition to a certain amount of self-interest in the form of egoism. Social altruistic values demonstrate a concern for other humans, and biospheric values acknowledge interest in non-humans or a sense of land ethic. Egoism is an innate concern for oneself. These components do not indicate mutual exclusivity but reveal correlative factors in behaviors and attitudes (Alibeli & White, 2011; Stern &

Dietz, 1994). Associated costs from each value perspective further illustrate these concepts and their connection to environmental concern. For example, if an individual assumes high personal costs related to environmental degradation, they will do more to protect and conserve (Stern & Dietz, 1994).

Research on environmental concern often focuses on demographics or other socioeconomic characteristics. Scholars have also attempted to ascertain behavioral factors, such as recycling participation or energy conservation, as being associated with an individual's level of environmental concern (Alibeli & White, 2011). Other qualities that might correlate to environmental concern are gender, culture, spiritual conviction, or other identifying characteristic. Inquiries have produced mixed results with regard to gender as a predictor of environmental concern (Stern & Dietz, 1994). Although, previous studies have noted party affiliation and associated philosophies as a strong predictor of environmental concern. Individuals with more liberal views or Democratic identification consistently express greater concern for environmental initiatives (Dunlap, 2008; Konisky et al., 2008). Economic development within a country also affects environmental concern. More developed countries remain proactive while developing countries stay predominantly reactive to environmental needs (Alibeli & White, 2011).

Dunlap and Van Liere developed the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) Scale as an effective measure of environmental concern (Alibeli & White, 2011; Dunlap, 2008). The authors have published three renditions since the publication of the original version of the NEP scale in 1978. The most recent revision saw a title change to the New

Ecological Paradigm Scale and became the most widely used measure of environmental concern due to its theoretical grounding in social psychology (Dunlap, 2008).

Support for environmental matters varies on the specific issue under discussion. Surveys suggested pollution as a priority item among participants with global warming and natural resource conservation rounding out the top three (Konisky et al., 2008). In many cases, the level of knowledge and awareness on the part of the individual garners support for pro-environmental actions. This detail might result from cultural surroundings or current practices within the local area.

**Ecological literacy.** Ecological literacy refers to an understanding of organic systems that sustain life on earth and an application of relevant principles that assist in the creation of sustainable communities. Previous studies suggested “even short educational programs may stimulate an increase in NEP scores among children and college students” (Dunlap, 2008, p. 15). Continued education and awareness subsequently enhances each generation’s knowledge from an ecological perspective.

Fundamental aspects of ecological literacy involve living systems, nature, systems thinking, an ecological paradigm, and collaboration among members of the community. More specifically, living systems represent open arrangements that have special characteristics and interact as an element of their environment through exchanges of materials and energy. Nature is an element that comes into the design of sustainable communities; nature has its limits, and future generations’ needs are considered. The systems thinking aspect of ecological literacy emphasizes the connectedness and interdependent relationships recognized through environmental exploration. A paradigm

shift to a more ecological view warrants recognition of earth's resource constraints in addition to the beginning of relevant documentation to illustrate concerns. Strategically, collaboration and partnership development may enhance civic engagement while creating a more involved and knowledgeable citizen base (Goleman et al., 2012; Manitoba, n. d.).

Without an adequate background or knowledge base, public officials might possibly act on inaccurate information. This can be due to the lack of environmental policy awareness or not knowing the true state of the community. Public officials should be cautious so as not to act on persuasive data that misrepresents the actual facts (Grundig, 2009). This lack of knowledge or consideration of environmental issues creates barriers (Jones et al., 2009) to the enactment of sustainable initiatives.

**Sustainability.** The terms *sustainability* and *sustainable development* are somewhat interchangeable in most respects. The most common definition of *sustainable development* comes from the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and encompasses aspects of the environment, economy, and society (Laureate, 2009; Matthew & Hammill, 2009; Seghezze, 2009). This universal definition as noted in Chapter 1 will be used as the point of comparison within this study.

The concept of sustainable development relates to fulfillment of basic human needs and living within the means naturally provided by earth's ecosystems. Equal distribution emphasizes an effort to maintain balance and not strain the supply or deplete these natural resources (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Expanding upon the three dimensions of environment, economy, and society as mentioned above, Kijek and Kasztelan (2013) provided characteristics of each. The

element of environment includes protection and quality advancements, pollution limits, and encouragement of supportable consumption. The element of economy entails innovative and effective efforts, which ensure a high quality of life. The social component involves equitable and integritous interactions that create healthy, safe atmospheres without discrimination. To further explain the interrelatedness of these characteristics, an individual should realize how “social order depends on the level of economic development, while the economy is to some degree dependent on the resources of the natural environment and the manner of their exploitation” (Kijek & Kasztelan, 2013, p. 104).

Natural resource governance illustrates a principle idea within sustainable development (Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009) and brought about its inclusion to the social response of global climate change (Arias-Maldonado, 2013). As such, sustainable practices involve the development and maintenance of various environmental factors and functions (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Matthew & Hammill, 2009) with this a primary goal of sustainability (Arias-Maldonado, 2013). Water and air quality, transportation and land use issues, as well as proper waste disposal represent pertinent components of sustainable development (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). These goals highlight the integration of climate change into sustainable efforts (Matthew & Hammill, 2009).

Seghezze (2009) posed a new concept of sustainability and made objections to the supportability of sustainable development. He offered his greatest concerns as the degree of anthropocentrism implied by the WCED definition, overstated importance of economy, exclusion of space and time, and the focus on human needs as the goal of

development policy. He proposed a five-dimensional model that included three dimensions of place, permanence as the dimension of time, and persons as the human dimension (Seghezze, 2009).

Anthropocene represents a more recent trend in sustainability. The term describes the impact that human actions have had on the earth's ecosystems. Global climate change is a prime example. With this in mind, sustainability and related principles and policies should be opened up for public discussion due to the various interpretations that may apply (Arias-Maldonado, 2013).

Sustainable development as it relates directly to municipalities might resemble efforts put into place based on ecological, economic, or social trends within the immediate area. For example, areas at risk for severe flooding or frequent wildfire occurrence develop specific policies that address these concerns. Cities with increasing populations or those transitioning from a core agricultural industry have more opportunities to implement sustainable growth and development due to the enhanced potential for expansion (Lubell et al., 2009).

### **Recycling Policy**

Recycling programs remain a necessary tool within local government efforts toward sustainability. For purposes of this study, recycling refers to the process by which a disposable item is ultimately reused for an alternative function or as a component of another product (USEPA, 1995). In most cases, municipalities are responsible for recycling programs within their respective boundaries.



**In-house programs.** Municipalities might use direct employees to operate in-house recycling programs. To maintain effectiveness, recycling programs need to be enforced on a consistent basis. Clarke and Maantay (2006) emphasized the importance of stability with regard to recycling program implementation, expectations, and enforcement. The City of New York struggled with recycling participation within their 59 sanitation districts over the course of 18 years extending from inception of the recycling program in 1988 to the year of the Clarke and Maantay study. Constant changes implemented by the mayor's office caused the variance in participation in recent years; the mayor based decisions strictly on a cost-savings plan that never materialized. A lack of adequate funding further contributed to an uneven distribution of policy enforcement efforts (Clarke & Maantay (2006).

**Contracting out.** The decision to contract a service rather than provide it with municipal employees involves several aspects of delivering the specific service. For example, contracted service providers might have certain advantages such as "a stronger focus on results because of the competition among suppliers, the necessity to earn at least an average return on investment, a more flexible labour force, fewer procedural constraints...can profit from economies of scale" (Wassenaar, Groot, & Gradus, 2013, p.415).

Contracting garbage and recycling collection services creates certain benefits for the municipality, yet may not be the best option for all municipalities to pursue. Studies reported an estimated cost savings of approximately 20%, while retaining the same quality level; the transaction costs included the acquisition of required equipment and

related resources. Other studies have posited no guarantee in claims of quality and efficiency with contracted collection services. Associated concerns such as local employment rate might also affect contracting out decisions (Wassenaar et al., 2013).

### **Qualitative Methods Used**

As presented in the literature, qualitative researchers use various investigative methods to explore their topic of concern. I found minimal selections of purely qualitative studies directly related to policy decision making; however, I did identify such studies relating to environmental issues. Kenis and Mathijs (2012) interviewed 12 engaged citizens regarding their preferences for behavioral changes. The authors chose an empirical qualitative method to “delve more deeply into people’s environmental convictions, experiences, and actions” (Kenis & Mathijs, 2012, p. 48). Other researchers opted to use Q methodology to examine individual subjectivity with regard to citizens’ decisions to change behavior due to climate change. The resulting case study included semistructured interviews and two focus groups (Wolf, Brown, & Conway, 2009). As an element of a mixed methods approach, the qualitative portion of Weaver-Hightower’s (2013) study incorporated policy analysis with ethnography. Weaver-Hightower spent considerable time explaining the concept of influence and how special interest groups are more likely to lead the charge for policy changes or maintain status quo. The author also justified the selected mixed methods approach by highlighting the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative individually; all aspects of the extent of influence plus the “hows” and “whys” were necessary to answer the research questions on education policy (Weaver-Hightower, 2013). Miler (2009) used structured interviews to ascertain how

offices of political elites understood constituent interests relating to energy and wetlands conservation policies. These qualitative research examples further justify my selection of a qualitative approach to explore the experiences and influences of city council members as they develop and implement environmental policies within their communities.

### **Filling the Gap**

The current body of literature does not adequately investigate the lived experiences or influence of factors considered by city council members as they discuss environmental policies. As municipalities continue the push toward sustainability, the insightfulness gained from this study proved highly beneficial. As a major goal of this study, I identified the most common policy influences of participating city council members and devised a ranking system based on their reported importance. This information is not only useful for the respective communities; it may apply in neighboring locales, extend to state officials, and eventually make its way to the federal level. To successfully debate policy changes, an individual must understand or at least acknowledge the influences considered by the opposing parties.

### **Summary**

This review of the literature introduced concepts and ideals related to general public policy issues. Local governments maintain a certain degree of authority on which to operate. City councils remain a central player in all policy decisions. Community involvement is an important aspect of these policy decisions as engaged citizens participate in public meetings. Problem identification is the first step in the policy process followed by agenda setting.

ACF provides an opportunity for like-minded individuals to bond together and support or argue against common ideas. As with any framework, ACF includes several assumptions that assist in describing particular belief systems and degree of trust for those with opposing policy ideas. Advocacy coalitions might also be an influential factor in policy development and implementation.

RCT involves decision making through the lens of expected utility. Most often, the possibility chosen provides the greatest benefit to the agent making the decision. Personal values, cost assessments, and other supportive elements do not necessarily impact final decisions. In this respect, some city council members might prefer the use of RCT in policy development.

Other policy influences discussed include political affiliation, religious views, and cost-benefit analysis. Political party affiliation denotes an association of philosophy and policy choices that may correspond to morals and values; whereas, religious views represent a deeper sense of spiritual beliefs. Cost-benefit analysis plays a role in each policy decision due to the municipality's fiscal constraints or purpose limits placed on spending. These and other factors impel city council members to vote one way or another on agenda items.

Specific matters regarding environmental governance covered within the literature review included environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainability. Policy attitudes often correlate with an individual's level of environmental concern. The greater an individual understands the ecosystem and relationships of its components, the higher an individual's ecological literacy. Sustainable development remains the foundation of

livable, viable communities. The combination of these concepts provides citizens, alongside their elected representatives, an opportunity to create the desired quality of life.

Combating global climate change will take a cohesive effort on the part of the entire world; however, small steps lead to bigger changes and eventually huge leaps forward. Municipal environmental policies and programs, particularly recycling programs, merely represent a small step. With each municipality doing their part, each action adds to the bigger changes in air quality, cleanliness, and enhanced quality of life for current and future generations. Qualitative investigation allows for the presentation of vivid descriptions in the pursuit of sustainable measures and factors that influence policy decisions. Chapter 3 proceeds to identify possible options for qualitative research as well as the selection of the particular approach, which lends itself to objectively answer the research questions and address the gap in the literature.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

Social science research often uses qualitative research methodologies to explore societal issues or those that require more effective data collection within a participant's natural setting. For this study, the selection of a phenomenological investigation enabled me to ask open-ended questions about the lived experiences and specific factors city council members consider when discussing and making decisions on environmental policies. This methodology warranted explicit descriptions from participants, which offered details not captured from a purely quantitative vantage point. The phenomenological approach emphasizes the telling of individual experiences in the participants' own words, whereas quantitative research focuses on testing hypotheses and correlating relationships between variables (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Patton, 2002; Rudestam & Newton, 2007) and would not have appropriately addressed the research questions.

The components of this chapter explore aspects of qualitative research. I first list all approach options and the rationale behind the selection of the chosen design. The chapter continues with an explanation of my role as the researcher and the research questions introduced in Chapter 1. Proceeding discussion presents aspects related to targeted participants of the study: selection criteria, sample size, and ethical considerations. Data collection plans and strategies for analysis finish the chapter.

## **Research Design and Approach**

Qualitative research provides five strategies or traditions as mechanisms for investigation: case study, narrative analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. Each strategy exhibits its own nuances yet may have some overlap with other strategies. In discussing four of the strategies below, I include a rationale as to their nonselection. In addressing the final strategy, I describe the methodology and distinct reason for its selection as the most effective approach to identify influential factors and portray individual experiences regarding environmental policy development, discussion, and implementation.

Of the qualitative strategies available, I excluded four from consideration for this study. Case study research presents the possibility of testing or generating theory or simply providing a meticulous description of an individual or event (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Patton, 2002). I did not select the case study approach due to its inability to portray participant experiences at the depth required to adequately answer the research questions. A researcher conducting a narrative analysis generally tracks the life or occurrences of one or more individuals (Huberman & Miles, 2002). I did not deem narrative analysis the most effective option because its premise does not match the intended purpose of this particular investigation. Researchers use an ethnographic approach when they need to interact in a group's everyday life to gain a more accurate understanding of their belief systems and behaviors (Huberman & Miles, 2002). I ruled out ethnography for this particular investigation, as the study's research questions did not warrant embedding myself into the culture of these participants for an extended amount of time. Grounded

theory is used to develop new theory as a result of research with a somewhat extensive data collection process (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Patton, 2002). The research questions of this study did not necessitate the development of a new theory but involved exploring and describing city council members' experiences during environmental policy decision making.

As one of the five qualitative research traditions, phenomenology presented itself as the best fit for this study; it offered a greater possibility of truly concentrating on and understanding each participant's lived experiences as told in the participant's own words. Phenomenological investigation bases its foundation on philosophies of inquiry established by Husserl. The premise of his method revolves around human consciousness (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Rehorick, 1995). More specifically, phenomenological research allows individual participants to develop a construct of their knowledge attained through lived experiences (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Rehorick, 1995). As mentioned throughout this section, other qualitative approaches did not represent viable options and were deemed less effective means of answering the study's research questions.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenological investigation entails the exploration of lived experiences; everyone creates his or her own reality based on perceptions of experiences. Different participants' lived experiences may reflect similar circumstances, yet they are not identical or even described in the same manner or level of detail (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Moustakas, 1994) due to variances in judgment, personal feelings and perception,



or even willingness to discuss and remember (Patton, 2002). A phenomenological investigation provided an ideal outlet for participants to elaborate on their lived experiences with rich and robust narratives rather than strictly answering yes-or-no questions.

Heuristic inquiry, in the form of phenomenology, focuses on understanding the true human experience. As each participant shared perceptions of personal experiences, I gained further insight into the authentic nature of these lived experiences. I used all the data collected, such as interview and questionnaire responses, observations, and notes, to depict a story based upon my interpretation. Each participant's story then joined with the others and created a thematic version of the human experience related to the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994; Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

### **Researcher Role**

In accordance with qualitative investigation methods, I served as the primary research tool. All forms of data collection such as interviews, observations, and notes remained my responsibility (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). This role required me to go through the process of epoche in an effort to set aside current perceptions and possible bias. Epoche assisted in understanding the experiences as told from a fresh perspective without considering prior knowledge; the process required a restriction of previous understanding to cultivate a degree of curiosity (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Epoche challenged me to bracket all thoughts, to become completely open and receptive to participant descriptions, and to recognize the impact bias might have on analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Even though researcher bias regarding environmental issues might not have been completely eliminated, epoche provided a mechanism of control. Prior to beginning any analysis, I wrote a description of any personal experiences with environmental policies in an effort to bracket thoughts and focus on participant responses. I was also mindful of nonverbal cues and tone used while facilitating interview sessions so as not to inadvertently influence participant responses (Creswell, 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008).

### **Research Questions**

Qualitative research usually centers on a broad, exploratory question. This study's research questions related directly to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

- RQ1: What are the experiences of municipal decision makers during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation?
- RQ2: What methods are used for identifying the appropriate facts to consider during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation?

A phenomenological approach uses open-ended questions to gain comprehensive responses from participants. This form of questioning allowed all participants to express themselves in their own words (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008; Huberman & Miles, 2002). Interview questions related to the primary research questions referenced above and are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Interview/Research Question Matrix*

| Interview question   | Research question supported | Variances due to interpretation |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| IQ 1: How would you describe your experience as a council member?  | RQ 1                        | RQ 2                            |
| IQ 2: How would you describe your experience in environmental policy development, decision making, and implementation? | RQ 1                        | RQ 2                            |
| IQ 3: Describe your membership to or inclination to align with a particular advocacy coalition, if any.                | RQ 2                        | RQ 1                            |
| IQ 4: How would you describe environmental concern?  | RQ 1                        | N/A                             |
| IQ 5: How would you describe ecological literacy?  | RQ 1                        | N/A                             |
| IQ 6: How would you describe sustainability in terms of environmental preservation for future generations?             | RQ 1                        | N/A                             |
| IQ 7: What specific factors do you consider when discussing environmental policies?                                    | RQ 2                        | N/A                             |
| IQ 8: What factors influenced your city's decision to either contract out or perform in-house recycling services?      | RQ 2                        | N/A                             |
| IQ 9: Describe policy situations in which you are more inclined to focus on rational choice theory, if any.            | RQ 2                        | N/A                             |
| IQ 10: How would you describe a day in personal your life as it relates to environmental policy decision-making?       | RQ 1                        | N/A                             |

I used the questions to evoke enough information from the study participants to develop an accurate conceptualization of the phenomenon under investigation (Huberman & Miles, 2002). The entire interview process allowed for follow-up questions in an attempt to pull out more rich, detailed explanations from the participants.

### **Context of Study**

The background for this study involved voting preferences of city council members currently serving within CVAG on environmental issues. Given the increase in negative impacts of global climate change, city policy makers serve as a significant first line of defense. This context holds valuable information with regard to understanding participant experiences and interpreting responses (Patton, 2002).

No previous relationship existed between me and any of the targeted participants. I was unable to establish an academic relationship with participants, as I did not want any prior contact to reflect on responses given during the study. The study warranted an adequate amount of fieldwork, which provided an opportunity for me to learn the jargon and become associated with current issues under discussion (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). I planned to attend city council sessions but could only view recorded sessions and read previous city council agendas to make myself aware of current policy issues. I was also unable to gain any sort of familiarization with city council members' personalities prior to conducting the study; I did not want my perception of their behaviors and attitudes to bias the actual data analysis.

### **Setting and Sample**

Qualitative research works best when performed within the participant's own natural setting. For purposes of this study, I conducted interview sessions at times and locations of the participants' choosing. This practice encouraged participants to speak freely and not be influenced by outside distractions.

Qualitative sample sizes are generally much smaller than quantitative sample sizes; this allows for a greater emphasis on the depth of responses than on satisfying a number. The opportunity to obtain greater detail leads to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Patton, 2002). Qualitative inquiry does not warrant an exact sample size; circumstances beyond my control ultimately determined the number of participants. I did not reach my desired sample size of at least 10, which represented 25% of the original targeted population. After expanding my participant pool, I did manage to secure a total of seven participants: city council members from four of the 10 cities, a city staff member, and an agency representative who could attest to the attitudes and behaviors of the entire region. My participant pool directly characterized 40% of CVAG's member cities.

Purposeful sampling remains a popular choice in social science research. Choosing participants who meet specific criteria in advance provided greater insight and more relevant data to efficiently answer the research questions during analysis. More specifically, criterion sampling was the best method for selecting appropriate study participants (Creswell, 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). This ideal

sampling method allowed for city council member service time to be the basis of selection and validated the original premise of the study.

### **Participant Criteria**

I scrutinized the pool of likely participants based on a predetermined set of criteria. City council members currently serving within CVAG composed the targeted population for this phenomenological investigation. A minimum service requirement of at least 1 year existed as an additional component of this purposeful sample; the 1 year of service condition provided a greater likelihood that responding city council members had participated in environmental policy discussions, which remained critical to answering the research questions. A review of each city council member's biography and service term provided the relevant information. The respective city websites maintained the pertinent material for evaluation of study participants.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I ensured the safety and confidentiality of each participant. All city council members, the city staff member, and the agency representative concurred with an informed consent agreement prior to the collection of any data. The consent contained crucial information regarding details of the study as well as an explanation of participants' rights (Creswell, 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). Given that city council members were not part of a vulnerable population, I anticipated no significant ethical concerns. However, they did fall within a category known as *political elites*. As a result, I took steps to ensure that each participant's responses remained confidential and did not make participant names available for review by anyone other

than myself. Subsequent findings and write-ups were also free of participant names. I maintained all digital audio recordings, field notes, and transcript data in a lock box and within password-protected files. All data will be held for at least 5 years (Creswell, 2007) in accordance with university policy.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

As mentioned previously, I served as the primary research instrument during this qualitative study. To enhance the experience, I spent some time becoming more self-aware. This process added credibility to the study in that a well-prepared, competent, astute researcher conducted the investigation. An unprepared, inept, and foolish researcher would not have had the same effect. My perceptions remained crucial when reporting study findings; in this respect, groundwork completed prior to the study was noticeable (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Patton, 2002).

#### **Collection**

As the primary qualitative tool, focused interviews were conducted in an attempt to discover factors considered over the past few years of environmental policy development. Focused interviews maintained a degree of structure yet allowed each interviewee a great degree of freedom when responding to questions (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). Open-ended questions made up the interview protocol and questionnaire; this type of question allowed the city council members, city staff, and agency representative to elaborate at-length on the “hows” and “whys” of past and recent decisions. Face-to-face interviews were preferable; these provided an opportunity to observe the participants and note nonverbal cues such as facial expressions in response to

questions (Creswell, 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). However, I accepted a completed questionnaire in lieu of an interview session upon the stated preference of a participating city council member. The subject matter and nature of the interview protocol established content validity.

I developed and submitted an interview protocol and questionnaire to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval prior to conducting interview sessions or sending out questionnaires. Supplementary elements addressed within the protocol included interview setting, time, participant name, and a full list of questions. I left ample space for additional notes and comments on the last page of the protocol (Creswell, 2007). The questionnaire was a reformatted interview protocol and had the same supplementary elements along with ample space for city council member responses.

I recorded interview sessions via digital audio device upon confirmation with the participant. The interview request was the first mention of planned recording; I also verified consent prior to the start of the session. I began the transcription of the digital audio recordings and transferred responses received via the questionnaire within a day's time using Microsoft Excel. Transcription signifies spoken word as translated into written discourse (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). As transcription ensued, it provided an auditory refresher of participants' comments and use of tone prior to analysis. The possibility for a second interview existed once analysis began. I ensured participants knew I may contact them for a second interview session or follow-up phone call to clarify any unclear statements.



Maintaining the integrity of participant responses remained critical to effectively interpreting interview transcripts. I compiled a draft version of findings as applicable to each city council member, city staff member, and agency representative and submitted to them for review and verification. As a result, I received concurrences from all interviewed participants and continued into the analysis stage of the study.

### **Analysis**

Qualitative researchers use inductive analysis to discover themes within the data. I began the inductive process with a thorough reading of the transcript of each participant's interview session or questionnaire response. This initial review included horizontalization of the data with equal value given to all relevant topics as described by the participants. The horizontalized statements provided a general sense of overall meaning, which assisted with subsequent coding of the data (Moustakas, 1994). I coded the data to break the plethora of information into meaningful portions or categories; the portions then began to represent significant themes (Creswell, 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008; Saldana, 2013), which generated both textural and structural descriptions to elaborate on the essence of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Coding the Data**

Coding represents the process of classifying data into meaningful segments. With inductive coding, researchers construct a coding scheme based on responses received from participants (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008; Saldana, 2013). A single word or short phrase that captures the essence of a participant response or researcher observation signified a code. The development of sufficient codes took multiple coding

cycles (Saldana, 2013). General rules for coding include mutual exclusivity of coding categories; all responses fit into one coding category with minimal use of a category labeled as other; and specificity of coding categories that define group differences (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). Line-by-line coding supported a higher degree of trustworthiness within the coding scheme and assisted with eliminating any researcher bias (Saldana, 2013). I anticipated at least three cycles of hand coding to adequately characterize the essence of the phenomenon as described within each interview transcript.

More specifically, I used the following coding methods:

1. In vivo coding permitted the use of each participant's own words as codes;
2. Causation coding attempted to ascertain not only how but why a certain outcome resulted by distinguishing relationships, belief systems, and influences on a phenomenon;
3. Narrative coding allowed the development of stories from the data, which depict a descriptive account of participant experiences (Saldana, 2013).

I compiled a codebook to detail the applicable coding scheme. The codebook provides an outline for others who may need to translate the data (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008) as it contains the codes, a description of each code, and an example of the exact data wording that prompted the code (Saldana, 2013). It was also used as a handy reference for me as I revisited the data (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008).

### **Finding Themes**

Significant repetitions of statements and perspectives shared by participants began to create themes in the study data. These themes provided both textural and structural

descriptions of lived experiences as told by study participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) by expanding statements into concepts that detailed the meaning behind the data and a deeper sense of what it all represented (Saldana, 2013). Ultimately, themes generated a depiction of the true essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2013).

### **Discrepant Data**

Given the nature of qualitative research, disconfirming evidence might appear during data analysis. While at the same time, a lack of disconfirming evidence within the data demonstrates a verification of the study findings (Creswell, 2007). I discovered little discrepant data during transcript analysis and attributed this to the imbalance of political affiliation and consistent personal interests expressed by the participants. A low response rate created this extenuating circumstance. Responses from more members of the Republican Party may have revealed more discrepant data during the analysis process.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Researchers must address validity, dependability, and confirmability as interrelated elements of trustworthiness. Validity relates to the legitimacy of qualitative investigation, which generates sound and reproducible results. Thus, the results are reliable and depended upon as a viable source of information (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The use of reflexivity in writing establishes confirmability (Patton, 2002). The use of bracketing assisted with maintaining confirmability of the study findings. Qualitative researchers may use different strategies from that of quantitative to accommodate these elements.

Measures of internal validity establish credibility. Qualitative inquiry focuses more on the meaningfulness and insight obtained from the data gathered than on sample size itself. Therefore, the quality of the data linked directly to its credibility. Member checking provided the participants an opportunity to review my interpretation and write-up of their piece of the study, which added to its credibility and accuracy (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Peer review effectively controlled internal validity; this review assisted as a means of verifying my coding scheme and theme analysis. Observations noted during interview sessions in the form of body language and facial expressions provided additional measures of credibility. The findings represented a triangulation of data from multiple perspectives as described by the participants rather than a report from a single source (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Patton, 2002; Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

Once again, reliability of the data collected and subsequent findings characterized the study's dependability. I analyzed all notes, interview transcripts, digital audio recordings, and questionnaire responses to provide a source of triangulation. These components of the research process represented an audit trail that may be verified for study suitability (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The coding process and codebook was used as a resource to verify reliability. Coding schemes remained as simple as possible in an effort to prevent errors when assigning responses to a specific coding category (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008).

Reflexivity improved the confirmability of the research findings. The standard objective approach used for quantitative reporting removed personalization and enforced

a strict academic style of writing. Accordingly, qualitative write-ups use a more reflexive method. Being reflexive allowed me to more fully engage the reader in the experience discovered throughout the investigation with a presentation of elaborate details and direct quotes from study participants (Patton, 2002). Bracketing aided confirmability as all of my preconceived thoughts and biases were set aside prior to interpretation of participant responses (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Presentation of Findings**

Chapter 4 presents the detailed process I used for study analysis and subsequent findings. Specific elements include direct quotes from interview transcripts and questionnaire responses that supported codes identified in each coding cycle. I discuss themes generated from the coding cycles and explain the amount of disconfirming evidence noted within the study data.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the study's phenomenological methodology. The purpose of the study linked to the viability of the qualitative research option. I determined that city council members' experiences and verbalizations of those experiences may most accurately describe the phenomenon of environmental policy discussions. Further discussion included additional aspects of the study with regard to sampling, interviewing, and analysis. Purposeful sampling was used as the sampling method; I used this method in combination with a decisive criterion. Interviewing was used as the primary research tool; however, I offered response via a questionnaire as a second option. Recorded interview sessions worked as an auditory refresher prior to coding. The generation of

recurring themes then allowed for the development of rich descriptions that fully depicted the essence of the phenomenon. I managed all elements of trustworthiness throughout the entire process and included evidence in the presentation of the findings in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

This qualitative study involved an examination of the phenomena associated with environmental policy discussions among city council members within Southern California's Coachella Valley region. I wanted to delve into city council members' lived experiences and determine the weight of various factors considered throughout the environmental policy process. The impact of individual experiences on final policy decisions represented key information in answering the study's research questions.

- RQ1: What are the experiences of municipal decision makers during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation?
- RQ2: What methods are used for identifying the appropriate facts to consider during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation?

This chapter proceeds with a description of the participants that includes key demographic characteristics. The data collection procedures and data analysis process constitute the bulk of the chapter. I also present evidence of trustworthiness as applicable, followed by the study's findings.

### Study Participants

The targeted research participants included city council members with Southern California's Coachella Valley region. I found it difficult to recruit participants from this relatively small population and cannot provide an exact explanation for their reluctance to participate. Due to the status of the participant pool, I did not offer any form of payment for participation. However, I did emphasize the fact that all responses would remain

anonymous throughout the data analysis process and subsequent report of study findings. In some instances, a separate email for each city council member was not available, which might have deterred a positive response.

Due to the low response rate, I had to get creative with participant selection. One of the city council members who declined to participate recommended that I seek input from an executive within CVAG. She stated that environmental policy decisions affecting the entire region were made collectively during CVAG meetings. I decided to include a CVAG representative who could provide an overall perspective on the environmental policy process, discussions, and outcomes. City staffers also play an important role in the policy process. I chose to broaden my participant pool to relevant city staff members who held subject matter expertise or performed research and had direct input regarding environmental policies.

As mentioned, few members within the targeted participant pool were openly receptive to the idea of agreeing to do the study. I had a mix of rushed, short answers and elaborate, lengthy explanations from the city council members, city staff member, and agency representative who did agree to participate. One participant was truly excited to talk with me about environmental policy concerns in the community and gave extensive details with regard to past and current city council discussions. Other participants were more reserved and stuck to basic responses rather than providing details of environmental policy discussions within the community. I had participants who eagerly provided examples of environmental policies enacted within certain CVAG cities as well as their observations of city council members during environmental policy discussions. Only



after I made one participant feel comfortable with my intentions did this participant open up to express views of environmental policy within the city and region.

### **Setting**

I considered the ideal setting for qualitative research for each participant. Thus, I conducted interviews at locations of the participants' choosing. Participant A opted to interview in a city hall conference room. Participants B, F, and G responded by questionnaire via email or fax; I cannot attest to the location at which these responses were completed. I conducted the interviews with Participants C and D in their office locations. Participant E actually suggested a local restaurant; this public location proved to be undesirable, and we moved the interview session to an outdoor setting.

I learned through the interview process that organizational conditions existed that were not expected to impact this study. A few cities within CVAG still have budget constraints and cannot afford to implement all environmental initiatives being put up for discussion. The budget restrictions have also impacted their ability to maintain adequate staffing levels required to support additional initiatives. The possibility remains that budget issues caused city council members to decline participation in this study.

### **Demographics**

Participants provided some basic demographic characteristics as part of the interview sessions and questionnaire responses. Men made up 70% of the original targeted participant pool; however, two of those men were excluded initially due to the time frame of their city council member service. The final study participants included four men and three women. Political affiliation and education level were not known or

assumed prior to receiving individual city council member responses. See Table 2 for a specific breakout of participant demographic characteristics obtained.

Table 2

*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

|               | Gender | Position       | Years of service | Political affiliation | Education level |
|---------------|--------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Participant A | Male   | Council member | 12               | Democrat              | High school     |
| Participant B | Male   | Council member | 20               | Democrat              | MBA             |
| Participant C | Female | Agency rep     | 7                | Unknown               | Unknown         |
| Participant D | Female | City staff     | 14               | Unknown               | MS              |
| Participant E | Male   | Council member | > 1              | Democrat              | MS              |
| Participant F | Female | Council member | 10               | No answer             | MBA             |
| Participant G | Male   | Council member | 7                | Republican            | College         |

**Data Collection**

Once I received the IRB's official approval number 06-24-14-0328816 and notification to conduct research, I began the recruitment process for study participants. I first selected at least one city council member with greater than 1 year of council service from each member city within CVAG. This selection provided an equal distribution of men and women and included a mixture of ethnicities. I obtained email contact information for selected city council members at the respective city's website. I sent an initial round of 10 recruitment emails with the informed consent agreement. Based on the low response rate, I sent an additional round of 14 recruitment emails 1 week later. I attached the informed consent agreement to these emails as well. This round put me at the limit of my participant pool for which direct contact information was available. The distribution of men and women grew out of balance but was a better representation of the targeted population.

I sent follow-up emails to city council members who had not responded by the cut-off date noted within the original email. At that time, I reiterated the confidentiality of the study and all write-ups of study findings. I also attached the questionnaire to these follow-ups to encourage responses and provided an extended date to reply. I did not gain any additional participation during this round of recruitment.

After an initial review of my progress, my committee suggested that I reach out to city staff members or additional agency representatives. I sent out nine more recruitment emails to city staff members working in the realms of planning, economic development, and sustainability. Each email requested participation and included the questionnaire as a means of encouragement. At this time, I also sent four reminders to city council members who had initially seemed interested and then did not follow through. I gained four more participants for my study during this round.

Upon receipt of consent to participate, I gave the city council members, city staff member, and agency representative the option of a scheduled interview or completing and submitting a questionnaire. Participants A, C, D, and E opted to meet for a focused interview, whereas Participants B, F, and G preferred to answer the questions on their own time. For those choosing an interview, the length of interview sessions varied based on the detail provided within participant responses. The longest interview lasted 72 minutes, with the shortest being only 16 minutes. I made observational notes regarding nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, sighs and inflections, and excessive pauses. Participants B, F, and G opted to use the questionnaire mechanism as

their chosen means of participation in the study. The length of responses received from all seven participants varied from short phrases to complete, well-structured sentences.

Both the interview and questionnaire were composed of 10 questions related directly to the research questions. Follow-up questions varied and were asked on the basis of participant responses in an attempt to garner more detail from data elicited during the questions coming directly from the interview protocol. The interview sessions were recorded via digital audio recording device. Upon completion of the last interview question, I thanked the participant for his or her time and ended the recording. See Appendix C for a copy of the questions contained within the interview protocol and questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis**

I used transcribed interview sessions and transferred questionnaire responses as the data for analysis in this study. I followed the analysis process outlined in Chapter 3 to include verbatim transcription and transference, coding, and theme generation. I transcribed each interview session from the digital audio recording into an Excel worksheet; I transferred all questionnaire responses received into an Excel worksheet within the same password-protected workbook. I reviewed all digital audio recordings at least twice to confirm that I had gotten all the phrasing, inflections, and pauses correct during the transcription.

As part of my role as a qualitative researcher, I went through the process of epoche in an effort to set aside any preconceived ideas regarding environmental policies or city council member responsibilities. Bracketing through epoche assisted me in

understanding the individual experiences as told by each participant without considering prior knowledge or ideals (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Epoche also allowed me to be completely open and receptive to participant descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Through both the interview and analysis processes, I maintained objectivity and did not intertwine the perspectives presented in the literature review.

### **Manual Coding**

I opted to manually code each interview transcript and questionnaire response. The process of coding breaks down all the data gathered into meaningful pieces of information (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008; Saldana, 2013). To begin, I read each transcribed interview session along with any observational notes at least five times to gain an overall generalization of the data. I wanted to ensure clarity of meaning and get an idea of the message each participant was conveying. I also read the transferred questionnaire responses at least five times to gain this same understanding.

**In vivo coding.** During in vivo coding, I used each participant's own words as codes. I used the literal description as spoken or written by each participant. I also looked for recurring words or phrases as well as ones that were stated with conviction. In vivo coding worked well for this study, as it created a foundation of codes from which to begin a deeper analysis. See Table 3 for a listing of coded words and phrases that led to the relevant themes.

Table 3

*Key Words Found During In Vivo Coding Cycle*

| Key word or phrase               | Number of times word present in transcriptions | Participant usage/reference |
|----------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Community/constituents/residents | 60   | 7 of 7                      |
| Educate/learn/teach/understand   | 50   | 7 of 7                      |
| Cost/expense/affordability       | 35   | 7 of 7                      |
| Political/conservative/party     | 17   | 4 of 7                      |
| Right thing/conscience           | 10   | 4 of 7                      |

With Participant A, I discovered a recurrence of ideals such as political divide, community benefit, educate the people, and leadership. He described the overall experience of serving as a city council member with statements such as “kind of a learning curve first of all, so I found out quickly how much I don’t know” and “as I discovered my role and discovered the policy that I set, I wanted to start imposing some of the values I had.” This last statement led into the political divide that exists in municipal agencies and throughout all levels of government. During the interview, Participant A remained adamant about serving in this public service role by “listening to the community . . . providing for my community . . . and how to make it better for my community.” When asked specifically about advocacy coalition, Participant A likened his involvement with board membership. For example, his service with the state’s water association had armed him with a level of understanding that he was able to pass on to the community as well as local media outlets and others within the political realm. As

policy discussions ensued and decisions were made, Participant A emphasized the importance of explaining the “how” and “why” of policy decisions to the affected community members to reinforce the fact that actions were taken in their best interest. “To me it became very easy to start developing this idea of what we should be doing, both as good stewards for the creation and then also as a policy maker and leader in my community.”

Participant B seemed more reserved and only provided short answers. He did not elaborate on specific policy actions but acknowledged participation in environmental policy development and decision making. Participant B described his overall city council service as “a fulfilling experience.” He also placed emphasis on the community as well as the “right thing to do” in environmental policy situations.

Participant C provided an overview of the experience working with all 10 city councils as well as county officials. She explained the high degree of environmental ethics, which presents itself in different ways throughout the diverse cities. In an area that has historically been considered conservative, views and actions toward environmental programs are changing. The agency representative reported how each city council maintains an appreciation for environmental concern and takes action based mainly upon what it can afford to do within the scope of existing budget constraints.

Participant D explained her experience working with her respective city council. She provided examples of recent environmental policies and the positive interaction between the city council and community. She also referenced the timing aspect and bureaucracy that play a significant role in the policy process. Participant D expressed that

she gets excited about going to work every day and educating people on environmental issues.

With Participant E, I discovered a passion for environmental policies and concern with regard to the lack of ecological literacy across the nation. He found being a city council member a fulfilling experience and was happy with his service thus far.

I find being a council member, I imagine being much more fulfilling than being a member of the state legislature where you have to go through 100 people and some watered-down version comes out. Here you've got five people and if two of them agree with you, it becomes the law.

Participant E continued by explaining some of the recent environmental policies enacted in his city and expressed this thought: "Environmental policy change involves social change, behavioral change, so the key is . . . to lead the public" and complete the implementation process with appropriate education. He also described the usefulness of advocacy coalition groups and information those more thorough groups provide.

However, independent research and investigation remain necessary because one cannot take all information at face value. Participant E offered a thoughtful definition of *sustainability* as "maintaining air, water, and land resources that are clean and pure enough for human and wildlife consumption . . . in a way that is economically viable."

He closed by reflecting on the necessary and important decisions he made as a city council member: "I am happy whenever I can inform the debate on public policy and the environment. I really enjoy that opportunity. Sometimes you're just dealing with name disputes, but sometimes you're working on endangered species."



Participant F provided succinct responses to each question and noted city council service as “educational, time consuming, [and] ethically and morally gratifying.” However, the fiscal constraints of the city placed difficulty on pursuing environmental policies that were not done as a result of CVAG intervention. Hostility and a lack of credibility regarding relevant information also added to her shortage of environmental policy experience. Participant F expressed the desire to pursue more environmentally friendly policies in the face of resistance.

The message and action comes when there is urgency as in when it is determined a species should be put on the endangered list. The convenience of using plastic seems to be more important than what it does to our environment.

Participant G considered his city council member service as a “great honor with lots of responsibility.” He further elaborated on the time demands and difficult level of issues dealt with in this public service role. However, he contended that the respective city council is dedicated to environmental issues, while also being considerate of economic development needs. Participant G expressed a high degree of environmental concern and ecological literacy as critical elements, which may be used to sustain society. Cost, community rights, and his responsibility to provide for the community ranked among his top three factors considered during environmental policy discussions. His personal, conservative behaviors aligned with these ideals, which were reflected in this statement: “I try and incorporate this [conservative behaviors] into my thoughts during decisions.”

**Causation coding.** With causation coding, I attempted to ascertain the influences, belief systems, and relationships that led to environmental policy outcomes. The goal was to infer the causal principles of the participant based upon the beliefs and influences described, which were used as motives during policy discussions. I found that both personal values and community needs played key roles in environmental policy decisions.

All city council members relied heavily on personal values when answering interview questions. Participant A talked extensively about religious beliefs absorbed during his upbringing and how these beliefs now affected all policy decisions. He also credited his childhood with giving him a strong concern for environmental conservation and preservation with this thought: “I grew up . . . being very, very concerned about the environment and future generations.” Participant B referred to values and the importance of understanding prior to determining a course of action for making policy decisions. Participant E described how his background and interests have played a significant role in his actions and decisions as a city council member as did Participant G. Participant F mentioned morals and her concern for the community regarding the consequences of policy actions.

**Narrative coding.** Narrative coding evolved into an account of individual experiences as described by participating city council members, city staff member, and agency representative. The participants’ experiences created a story of the cultural and social influences on all aspects of environmental policy. Each interview question helped to create this story.

When asked about experiences in environmental policy development, decision-making, and implementation, participants gave an indication of their level of involvement with respect to such policy decisions. First, the demographics, location, and size of the respective communities held significant influence on decisions made by the city council. For example, Participant A referred to contradictory goals of the city's planning department from that of its school district. He had been assigned to a school committee and used the knowledge gained from the school group as a means of influence to more closely align the goals of the two departments for the betterment of the community. Participant B stayed with the classic environmental policy definition and referenced his work with solar development and multispecies habitats, whereas Participant A expanded his definition to include quality of life issues such as clean air, clean water, economic development, public health and safety, and alternative energy sources. "What I found was things like sidewalks, park space, green belts, schools, and proximity to neighborhoods were very important. I have an impact on the geographic and cultural environment of my community." Participant C reiterated the fact that all cities within CVAG display a "high environmental ethic and interest in environmental programs." The agency maintained a good participation rate with environmental policy development and implementation with its member cities. Participant D focused on the timing aspect due to the bureaucratic nature of government and the ability of city councils to fast track items that hold significant importance and impact to the local economy and general public. Participant E described his city as one of the more progressive cities with regard to environmental policies; two key policies were recently passed, which created fundamental shifts in the

way the communities will live and work from now into the future. Participant F did not provide any specific environmental policies initiated by her city and referenced a lack of consensus on environmental issues, which at times turned into hostile situations.

Participant G explained his involvement “in planning and issues related to the environment. We are very much dedicated to conservation and renewable energy while also being business friendly.”

Descriptions of the concept of environmental concern remained somewhat consistent among the participants as they recognized levels of environmental concern vary throughout the communities. Participant A expanded upon his thought process as follows:

We compartmentalize so much of our policy-making just like we do our personal lives, which can be very destructive. I look at it as one of the overriding, overarching policy decisions that I deal with because again, if I’m taking quality of life, if I’m talking about economic development, I’ve got to think about the total environment.

Three participants mentioned the different viewpoints of political parties regarding environmental concern. “Conservatives . . . don’t have a natural bend towards all this environmental” concern and support for related policy issues. Despite the political connotations of policy issues, people can change their view when faced with a severe environmental consequence that directly affects health and safety. Participant A provided a prime example of a conservative neighborhood faced with health issues directly related to a nearby biomass facility and the actions taken to resolve community concerns.

Participant F noted how the delivery method of messages to change behaviors in light of new environmental policies often leads to negative reactions. Participant C expressed how the Coachella Valley region, as a whole, shows a movement toward more environmentally friendly policies and practices. Participant D focused on health and safety concerns, which have the potential to impact livability. Participant E maintained the idea that the current generation has an obligation to build long-term sustainability. He also emphasized the value of preserving open spaces and keeping wild lands wild with this statement: “I think that smart growth policies that work like urban infill and density make much more sense than sprawling across open space.” Participant G provided examples of specific areas of concern to include energy and water.

The participants’ depiction of ecological literacy maintained the academic aspect of this life-sustaining systems thinking model. Participant G’s thoughts and perception of ecological literacy was noted as follows: “To understand the natural systems on Earth. To understand the principles of ecosystems and to use those principles to sustain society.” Participant D’s description elaborated on the importance of “an individual having knowledge of their own environment” with “policy-makers have[ing] a higher level of ecological literacy” by knowing the critical, environmental aspects of where they live. More specifically, these aspects were comprised of native flora and fauna in addition to water sources and topography. Participant B’s response is summarized in this way: “The ability of people to understand the problem and determine [a] course of action.” Participant A also referenced the practical application of the ecological literacy movement with this thought: “So many people now who know to turn off the water while

they are brushing their teeth. You know we do these little things. We sort our trash . . . and then some have been getting more sophisticated.” Education and awareness programs continue to provide communities with the needed information to gain understanding, which increases their willingness to participate and seek out additional resolutions to environmental issues. Participant E disagreed on the current level of ecological literacy by stating: “I’m going to say there’s a very low level of ecological literacy nationwide.” He continued to say that “ecology is not taught to people as part of their general education;” therefore, it is not feasible to say they are fully literate because ecological literacy represents a specialization. Participant F also felt the true essence of ecological literacy is fully captured by only a few people.

One participant referenced the textbook definition of sustainability as the three-legged stool of economy, environment, and ethics, whereas the discussion of sustainability for others turned to alternative energy sources and the development of new technologies or the critical balance of air, water, and land resources. “Our models in the past until recently have always been coal, nuclear, [and] natural gas. Here we have the opportunity to do wind, to do solar, and to do thermal.” Participant A continued as he elaborated on the development of technologies to become more economically efficient with this statement: “I think that’s where we become the leaders.” Participant B mentioned the need to “wean ourselves off of fossil fuels,” while also addressing species protection as a means to maintaining nature’s balance. Participant F noted the inconsistency in the understanding of everything sustainability entails. Participant D simplified sustainability as efforts “to ensure that you have resources for the future.”

Participant E referenced particular elements of sustainability in his description as well as wildlife; he further explained how humans need to make smarter decisions by building smarter houses that use less water and retrofitting older ones. Participant E focused on the critical balance that must be maintained between natural resources and economic viability. Sustainability for Participant G involved an example of long-term development and planning of communities, which also included the protection of natural resources. I felt the following quote summed up this particular response from Participant A: “All those other issues are important, but that’s the major issue because without a sustainable environment, we’ll all perish.”

When asked specifically about the city’s recycling services, all city council members stated that all waste-related services were contracted. They noted cost as the primary reason behind the decision because contracted services were more affordable than in-house staffing. Budget constraints had already impacted staffing levels making the contracted service a more viable option. Participant E commented on how opting to use a recycling contractor was smart public policy. Participant G likened the contract to a private-public partnership that allowed the city to stretch its resources. All city council members reported employment of a person within the city staff with program oversight responsibilities.

Although all participating cities confirmed contracted recycling services, the experience with the contractor varied. Participant D explained how the franchise waste hauler had agreed to fund the sustainability program for the city with the revenue streams generated directly from recycling. Participant A described contract negotiations as a

critical element to success because the city must live with the terms for the length of the contract. Contractors might potentially build in automatic annual increases for which they do not have comparable increases in expenses. This discovery remained questionable in addition to the city council members who originally approved the contract a few years ago.

City council members not only play a role in environmental policy decisions, they live within the communities they serve. When asked about how their personal lives related to environmental policy decision making, they took different approaches. Participant A immediately referred to several meetings scheduled for that day pertaining to conservation and environmental quality as well as public safety. Currently, his role and responsibility of representing the community holds a high priority. He continually strives to serve as a role model for his children. “When I’m gone, [I want them] to look back and say, you know my dad did everything he could to ensure that the next generation has a chance.” Participant E also referred to meetings on energy and the environment in addition to wildlife concerns; he continually showed enthusiasm for environmental topics and the opportunity to make positive social changes in the community. Participants B, D, and F took a more literal approach and shared personal activities such as the use of reusable grocery bags, walking more, recycling bottles and glass, composting yard waste, reducing electricity consumption, donating unwanted clothing, biking to work, and taking the train rather than driving a personal vehicle.



## **Theme Generation**

The themes generated from city council member, city staff member, and agency representative responses created a depiction of the true essence of the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2013). Even though responses varied in context, the message behind the words showed through. This section explains five significant themes and provides a selection of participant quotes within Tables 4 – 8 that support the themes generated after completion of the coding cycles.

**Community needs first.** Participants emphasized personal values and the importance of fulfilling the needs of the respective communities. These values were primarily drawn from their upbringing, interests, and religious background. City council members considered the demographics of the community as well as the location and how areas outside its boundaries impacted environmental policy decisions. Figures 1 - 3 further illustrate the diversity of the communities within CVAG. Along with the comments found in Table 4, Participant F resolved to consider known and potential unintended consequences of policy actions in an effort to protect the community's best interest and their willingness to accept any changes.

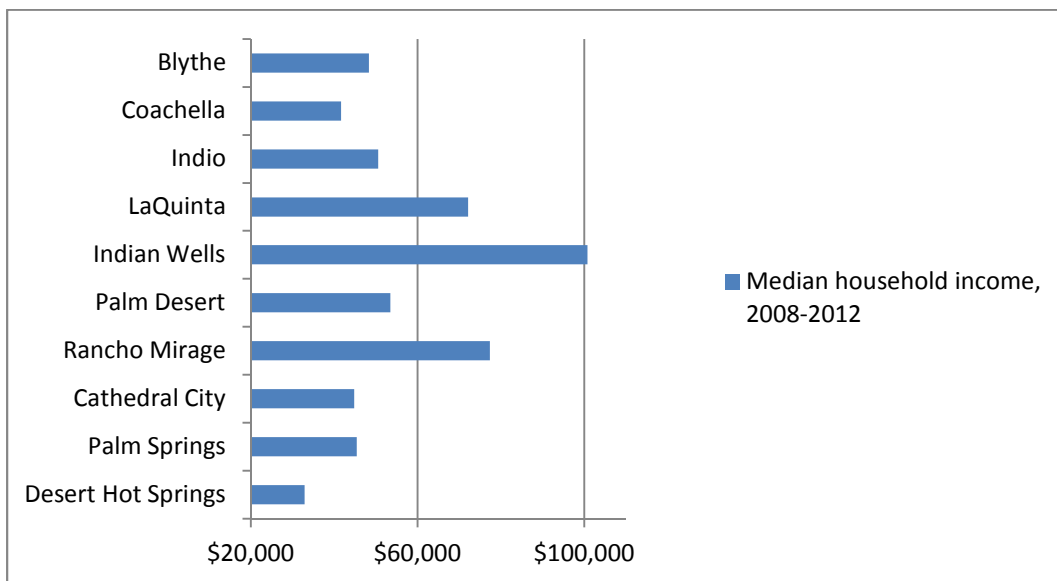


Figure 1. Median household income of member cities. Data from *State & County Quick Facts*, by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>

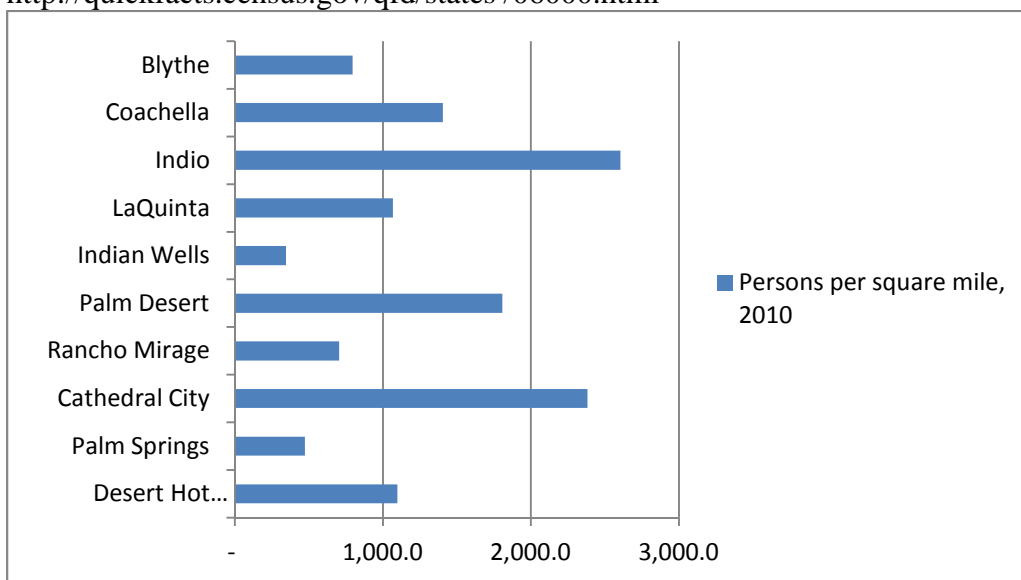


Figure 2. Population density of member cities. Data from *State & County Quick Facts*, by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>

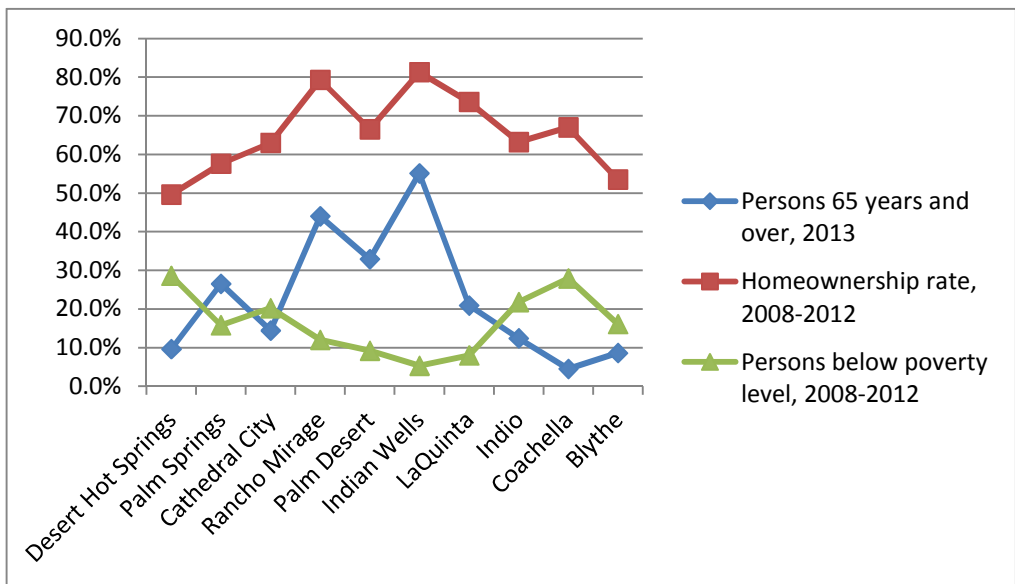


Figure 3. Wealth distribution and retirees. Data from *State & County Quick Facts*, by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>

Table 4

*Theme—Community Needs First*

| Participant statements  | Researcher perceptions  | Observations  |
|---|---|---|
| P A: I really believe part of our leadership is to be, um, we should be listening to the community. We should be hearing what they have to say, and in many cases taking direction from them. | Community needs are important                                 | Participant appeared excited and used a map on the wall to show community boundaries. |
| P C: It's kind of hard to turn down a group of high school kids showing up saying you should do something about greenhouse gases.   | City council members support community requests (if possible) | Participant smiled and laughed.   |
| P D: If it's gonna harm or benefit their constituents; if it makes an impact on their constituents, i.e. voters, then they [city council members] are really careful about what they vote on. | City council members show concern with policy impacts         | Participant seemed eager and sincere.   |
| P E: It would be an ethical violation for me to make a decision based upon what would benefit me, and I think the community would see that.   | Community needs outweigh personal gain                        | Participant showed keen interest and answered openly.                                 |
| P G: [It is] rewarding to see work completed for the community.   | Community should benefit from policy actions                  | N/A (Questionnaire response)  |

**Educate the people.** A critical element of policy implementation, as reported by study participants, involved the preceding and continued education of the affected community. City council members gained knowledge through research, presentations, and board membership and recognized the fact that they must educate themselves on environmental policies and initiatives prior to making decisions. In addition to the comments within Table 5, Participant D illustrated the importance of educating the public and getting them involved in the policy process by offering the example of neighborhood associations and how action from these self-organized groups benefited the community. Participant E also emphasized a lack of ecological literacy and significant need for continued education in an effort to provide a framework for future environmental policies and programs. Regardless of the method, participants made it clear that educating the affected community remains critical to the success of environmental policy actions.

Table 5

*Theme—Educate the People*

| Participant statements  | Researcher perceptions  | Observations   |
|---|---|--|
| P A: We are taught to know so much of this information; now we have to educate the community. We have to inform them why this [environmental policy] is within our interests. | Community education and buy-in is critical                                | Participant looked concerned and made expressive movements with his hands. |
| P D: I think it is the job of government to educate and inform and get their citizens to participate.   | Community education is part of government's role                          | Participant got excited and spoke faster.                                  |
| P E: We need to take a breath and let everyone get used to it [newly enacted environmental policies]. We have some educational process; it's not just a law-writing process.  | Community education is vital to successful implementation and enforcement | Participant spoke with conviction and concern.                             |
| P F: Before regulations are enacted, the media should play a larger part with broadcasting educational facts without personal commentary.                                     | Information provided to community should be strictly factual              | N/A (Questionnaire response)   |
| P G: [Citizens should] understand the principles of ecosystems and [how] to use those principles to sustain society.  | All citizens should maintain a certain degree of ecological literacy      | N/A (Questionnaire response)   |

**Fiscal responsibility.** Participants referenced cost as a consideration for all policy actions and not just environmental. More specifically, city council members identified the cost of providing in-house waste and recycling services rather than contracting out as the primary reason for the decision. This study also revealed a fiscal diversity within CVAG member cities. Participant C focused on environmental policy affordability and the fact that a few cities have not fully recovered from the last recession and still contend with tight budgets. Table 6 displays comments from other participants showing cost concerns as a factor for environmental policy discussions.

Table 6

*Theme—Fiscal Responsibility*

| Participant statements  | Researcher perceptions                                  | Observations   |
|---|---|--|
| P A: There's a cost-benefit thing that we have to do all the time because we're public policy-makers. Like now with water, the drought, groundwater management, um, there's still the sensitivity to pricing. | Cost considerations play a role in all policy decisions | Participant spoke seriously.                         |
| P E: It is a cost-benefit analysis. It's good for the planet, but the city has to be able to afford it.   | Policies must be affordable                             | Participant grinned and tapped his pen on the table. |
| P F: As a public servant, I have to focus on cost. But in doing so, I compare cost now versus the cost later in situations that warrant this type of scrutiny.  | Long-term costs are just as important as short-term     | N/A (Questionnaire response)                         |
| P G: [We consider] cost, long-term effects of [an] issue . . . and goal of discussion.  | Cost impacts city goals                                 | N/A (Questionnaire response)                         |

**Political divide (or not).** Participants spoke of observed differences between political affiliations during environmental policy discussions. Two participants described the possibility for relevant discussions to become combative, which have the potential to lead to tumultuous atmospheres full of resistance. Despite the existence of a political divide, participants did comment that agreement between the parties is possible. City council members credited mutual respect as the architect of agreement on environmental policy decisions. The nonpartisan nature of city council membership further illustrates the ability of city council members to associate with the city council itself rather than a particular party affiliation.

Table 7

*Theme—Political Divide (or Not)*

| Participant statements   | Researcher perceptions   | Observations   |
|--|--|--|
| P A: In the bigger debate, the national debate, the global debate, you know we find ourselves divided along party lines. It all becomes convoluted based upon policy and politics. | Bad city council experience leaves an impression                 | Participant was very direct and continuously hit the table with his hands. |
| P B: There may even be a difference of opinion on government involvement in the process, but a desire, nonetheless, in making sure we have a clean planet.                         | City council members can agree given a certain set of priorities | N/A (Questionnaire response)   |
| P C: You know politically, at least in the past, it's been a pretty conservative area. That's changing.  | Political ideals change and merge over time                      | Participant focused on her response and spoke slowly.                      |



**Do the right thing.** Participants likened environmental policy decisions to “the right thing to do” in many cases. City council members emphasized how the right thing to do does not equate to a specific political affiliation but the necessary way to address a community concern. Even in spite of resistance, city council members took action based on what they knew to be the right thing to do for the environment as well as for the affected community. Personal values and belief systems once again played a significant role in environmental policy outcomes.

Table 8

*Theme—Do the Right Thing*

| Participant statements   | Researcher perceptions  | Observations  |
|--|---|---|
| P A: I think it's more basic than that and going back to my Catholic upbringing and my Christian faith . . . I just look at it as the struggle of good and evil. We need to fight that evil, and we need to try to persevere for the good. And you know that good I talk about is not really my own family; that struggle provided for them. I also have to provide for my community . . . for my country, and then for the planet. It goes to the conscience. | Childhood influences created a great concern for environmental protection and emphasized how one should stick to morals | Participant's tone grew louder and more adamant.      |
| P B: [Factors include the] result to our area of [the] planet due to our policy action . . . and what is the right thing to do.  | City council members express morals through policy actions  | N/A (Questionnaire response)                          |
| P C: There's a pretty strong interest and appreciation for environmental concern, and they [city council members] all sort of express that in different ways because they [cities] are very different.   | City council members have the desire to support their community in the best way possible                                | Participant was relaxed but cognizant of word choice. |
| P D: There's times when politicians will just do the right thing because they know it's the right thing. There's times that they might do the right thing and maybe what others think is the wrong thing based on what they know that their constituents want.   | City council members make decisions for their community in the face of resistance                                       | Participant spoke sincerely.                          |

### **Discrepant Data**

I discovered little discrepant data during the analysis. The only topic of disagreement involved the level of ecological literacy displayed within the region. Two city council members felt citizens and even some government officials do not have a deep well of applicable knowledge of the environment and associated issues. One city council member felt that citizens do display behaviors that coincide with a decent level of ecological literacy, whereas the other two city council members did not specifically refer to the level of ecological literacy within their communities. I attributed any further lack of discrepant data to the fact that the majority of participating city council members identified themselves as a member of the Democratic Party with shared personal interests. As a general rule, like-minded individuals join political parties that represent their own personal ideals and values. I did not request the political affiliation for the city staff member or agency representative as the focus of the study remained the attitudes and behaviors of the city council members themselves.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

I maintained trustworthiness of the data analysis throughout the entire process with the use of member checking, peer review, and triangulation of observations noted during interview sessions. When compiling my transcript interpretation for review by each participant, I included areas of emphasis evidenced by serious tones, hand gestures, and facial expressions. Participants concurred with my interpretations and did not request any adjustments prior to reporting. A colleague with an earned doctorate served as my peer reviewer; he confirmed my thought process and coding scheme. The codebook

developed and used during the coding process provided an audit trail of transcript analysis, which satisfied the element of dependability. I separated the codes by coding cycle for ease of understanding. Bracketing via epoche and reflexivity in writing ensured an academic nature to attest to confirmability.

## **Results**

To answer the study's research questions, I reviewed the coding cycle data and themes generated as a result of data analysis. I continued in an effort to ascertain the lived experiences of city council members as they go through the environmental policy process. I now present answers to the study's research questions as determined according to participant responses. An additional section following the research question answers describes environmental policies of particular importance to CVAG cities.

### **Research Question 1**

What are the experiences of municipal decision makers during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation? Interview questions 1, 2, and 10 allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences. Question 1 involved each participant's experience as or with a city council member, while question 2 narrowed the focus to the environmental policy process. Question 10 related everyday activities to the participant's role as an environmental policy decision maker or subject matter expert. Elements of interview questions 3, 4, 5, and 6 contained insight into participant attitudes and behaviors, which also assisted with detailing their experiences. Question 3 inquired into advocacy coalition participation. Questions 4, 5, and 6 covered the related concepts of environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainability, respectively.

When answering the first interview question, participants described experiences ranging from combative situations to mutual understandings that led to fulfilling and gratifying involvement with a city council. The city councils within CVAG are composed of people with diverse backgrounds and experience levels. Participants' public service time ranged from greater than 1 year to 20 years. Most participants reported at least some college education, although one participant indicated his education level as high school. Due to the bureaucratic nature of government, Participant D mentioned the varying time frames that must be allowed for environmental policy actions to go through the entire policy process. For this reason, Participant G mentioned the dedication and time required to lead in this public service role; he also noted the rewards of seeing the end result of policy actions within the community.

City council members who display passion and conviction toward environmental policies might persuade other city council members who have historically not been all that interested in such policies to change their opinion. However, this does not hold true for all CVAG cities, as Participant F referenced minimal participation with city initiated environmental policies despite the desire to remain proactive. Participant E expressed a high level of interest in environmental policies on which he used to inform policy debates both at the city and regional levels. Committees and board memberships also added value to city council member arguments regarding environmental policies; the knowledge gained allowed the particular city council member to articulate sufficient reasons why or why not action must be taken. Participant A made this statement: "We may argue over tax breaks and stuff like that, but when it comes to the policy and the running of this city,

we're really very close about that." He also reported a 60% pass rate of environmental policies within the city's purview, while Participant C expressed a good participation rate of all member cities for environmental initiatives falling under the guidance of CVAG.

### **Research Question 2**

What methods are used for identifying the appropriate facts to consider during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation? Interview questions 7, 8, and 9 focused on factors and influences of city council decisions. Question 7 covered the general scope of factors that may be considered, while question 8 related directly to the city's recycling services. Question 9 focused on policy situations involving RCT. Participants also referenced environmental policy factors when answering questions 1, 2, and 3 or as a result of comments they felt inclined to add at the end of the interview. Responses depended greatly upon interpretation of each interview question by the participant.

Community benefit remained the primary factor to environmental policy decisions with cost coming in second. Participants felt motivated to provide for the communities and emphasized this over cost considerations in most instances. Other elements for consideration included the morally correct action to take in each circumstance and adequately using the knowledge gained from board and association memberships.

City council members who take time to learn everything they can about the community lead the charge with respect to knowledgeable policy discussions. Participant A elaborated in this way: "I mean everything from the history of the budget and then how

we adopted our budgets, what our revenue streams are. It was a very exciting, part academic, a lot of political, and then a lot of patience and cultivation.” Community-focused decisions also allow for a balance of environmental justice. “I really believe [as] part of our leadership, we should be listening to the community. We should be hearing what they have to say.” Participant D talked about a trend she has noticed over the last 5 to 10 years with respect to community involvement; she stated that city council members really do take public comments under consideration.

Cost entered the conversation as participants provided examples of specific considerations to environmental policies. Given the desert location of the cities within CVAG, water rates, groundwater management, and drought issues offered prime examples of policies with cost noted as a factor. When speaking of creating a tiered rate system for water usage, Participant A commented: “This is common sense. It costs a certain amount to provide the service.” Participant C referred to cost considerations as a primary factor due to the negative impacts member cities have felt over the last few years because of the nation’s recession.

Some of them are in very difficult situations budget wise, but they are very conscience of the impact to their staff. There is some reluctance to take on an initiative because they are concerned about whether they can support that; they don’t want to overload their staff.

Participant D commented on the policy approval from a cost perspective: “I would say that when we know that things are budgeted for, when there’s a line item account in the budget, they’re [city council] really comfortable with voting on it or approving policies

and programs.” However, the same does not hold true for emergency situations. In this instance, city council members have the ability to act quickly within existing fiscal constraints based on known facts in a way they feel is in the best interest of the community. Participant E further described the use of a cost-benefit analysis with regard to all policies and not just environmental. Participant F referenced how all policies warrant scrutiny and a critical analysis of cost both at implementation as well as into the maintenance phase, while Participant G also expressed concern with the long-term costs of all policy actions.

Two other primary considerations for city council members related to ethics and education. “Do the right thing” often equated to morals and personal values held by the participants. When providing an example of health and safety initiatives, Participant A stated: “We’re manipulating the environment in order to prevent disease and yet still not damage the environment.” Board and association memberships also provided valuable insight to city council members. Participant A expressed this thought: “You want to get in ones that are nonpartisan but that are data-driven, policy-driven, and then you can consume it and then utilize it to the best of your understanding.” Participant D also advocated for nonpartisan groups due to their focus on education. The right thing to do does not equate to a specific political affiliation but the necessary way to address a community concern.

### **Environmental Policies of Interest**

Throughout the course of discussions with participants, I discovered environmental policies of particular importance to CVAG cities. Current priorities

involved restoration of the Salton Sea, water conservation initiatives, and a plastic bag ban. Noteworthy environmental policies previously put into action included a regional multispecies habitat plan and the enhancement of alternative energy sources. Participant C referenced the significant benefits to the multispecies habitat plan; however, each city made sacrifices to join the plan. She further explained how the Coachella Valley region, as a whole, aims to be an environmental leader in Southern California.

**Salton Sea.** Two city council members expressed great concern with the current state of the Salton Sea. Participant E commented about an “overwhelming ecological disaster that’s coming, which is the shrinking of California’s largest lake.” I found articles dating back to as early as 1998 on problems relating to the declining health of the Salton Sea and the negative effects felt by communities in the immediate area. The Salton Sea remains the largest lake in California and is a critical life-source in the flight path of 380 migrant birds. No alternative body of water exists as “more than 90% of California’s wetlands have disappeared in the last century due to human development” (Cohn, 2000, p.295). At one time, 100 million fish made the sea home making it a fisherman’s dream. In 1998, the Salton Sea Reclamation Act was passed by Congress that mandated studies and additional research in an effort to preserve the lake. Many proposals were developed; however, significant action did not follow due not only to political but to environmental and technical challenges (Cohn, 2000).

What is the current plan for restoration of the Salton Sea? Participant E mentioned a specialty California license plate that could be available if 7,500 residents take the first step to request it. Once in production, proceeds from the registration fees would go



toward restoration efforts. In the meantime, Participant A discussed his efforts to raise the alarm and call greater attention to the lake's imminent death. He has spoken in several meetings about the toxic dust clouds blowing inland from the drying Salton Sea. He noted the valuable mix of resources within the immediate area and offered suggestions for their use. The ultimate goal for both city council members remained to restore the Salton Sea to its grandeur and recreate the habitat for migratory birds and extensive fish populations. Once restored, the revenues generated from recreational activities, such as fishing and camping could be used in continued preservation efforts.

**Water conservation.** The desert environment of the Coachella Valley region warrants significant water conservation initiatives particularly in a time of severe drought. Participant E noted that by definition, "the desert is always in a drought; it's in a permanent state of drought." Despite the truth in that statement, the State of California has entered a severe drought with restrictions mandated by state officials. Two of the city council members referred to additional restrictions that have been placed on their residents. Participant A explained how the city's water board worked to develop a new tiered-rate system to encourage water conservation in combination with an 8% utility tax increase during the next 5 years equating to a total increase of 40%. He provided within his example how residents staying within the first tier would actually be saving money compared to current rates; second tier users would spend roughly the same for water usage; whereas, those water users in the third and fourth tiers would incur penalty costs. Participants E's city opted to focus on water conservation in a different manner; examples of the newly enacted policy included restricting lawn irrigation times and

mandating that restaurants not serve water unless it is specifically requested. Participant E reflected on the tighter water usage constraints: “[These changes] mark a permanent, fundamental shift in our relationship with water.”

**Plastic bag ban.** Two cities, in particular, worked to create a regional plastic bag ordinance as a result of working groups comprised of city staff members and engaged citizens. The groups presented the policy and its components during CVAG meetings. Participant C confirmed the desire to proceed with regional action even with the possibility of a similar state initiative in the near term. CVAG member city representatives recognized the negative impact plastic bags have on the environment both locally and globally. Due to fiscal constraints, only four cities had the capability to enact the plastic bag ordinance. Participant A explained the cost-benefit analysis performed, which considered costs of all types of bags in addition to consumer and commercial consequences including possible fines and fees for noncompliance. The readily available supply of reusable bags in almost all stores added to the argument in support of the plastic bag ban.

### **Summary**

This phenomenological investigation required experiential input from city council members in order to ascertain how individual lived experiences impact environmental policy decisions. This chapter covered a description of participants, the data collection and analysis processes, evidence of trustworthiness throughout the process, and a report of the study’s findings. I did not reach my goal participation rate but finished the data collection process with seven relevant informants.

Data analysis resulted in five significant themes that I used to answer the study's research questions. First, individual experiences of city council members may range from conflicting views to agreeable interpretations of environmental policy actions. Participants described current experiences as "fulfilling" and "welcoming" as well as "a great honor." Second, city council members have the opportunity to learn through board and committee memberships in addition to presentations at meetings that help to address concerns and issues related to environmental initiatives. Finally, overall community benefit topped the list of factors considered during environmental policy discussions. Cost-benefit also remained a primary factor as cities continued to emerge from the impacts of the nation's last recession. Other factors considered during policy discussions included the moral aspect of pro-environmental behavior as well as the importance of education and ecological literacy in responding to local and global environmental challenges.

The next chapter presents an interpretation of the findings as related to this study's conceptual framework. The chapter also includes the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, practical applications of the study findings, and implications associated with positive social change. Chapter 5 closes with the essence and relative importance of the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

This qualitative study's purpose involved an examination of city council members' lived experiences surrounding environmental policy initiatives within the respective communities. The nature of the study encompassed related concepts of environmental concern, ecological literacy, and sustainability as a means to further identify city council members' attitudes toward pro-environmental policies. I conducted the study to develop a list of the most important factors considered during environmental policy discussions, which were specific to this region of Southern California and based solely upon participant responses.

This chapter proceeds with an interpretation of the study findings as compared to literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Additionally, I explain the study findings in the context of the conceptual frameworks of ACF and RCT. I present the limitations of the study that arose during the data collection process and describe recommendations for future research. Finally, the study's implications for positive social change and the essence of the study finish the chapter.

### **Interpretation of Study Findings**

The results of this qualitative study depict the most important factors relevant to environmental policy decisions within CVAG as reported by participating city council members, a city staff member, and an agency representative. Two primary research questions guided the study. I compared answers to these research questions to previous research discussed in the evaluation of peer-reviewed literature. The conceptual

framework presented in Chapter 2 also comes into play as I relate this study's findings to ACF and RCT.

### **City Council Experiences**

The first research question involved city council members' lived experiences and how those experiences affected environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation. The answer depended greatly upon the attitudes and interests of the specific city council as a whole. For example, one city council member reported a combative-type situation due to the attitudes expressed by fellow city council members in an area outside of CVAG. Upon moving to a city within CVAG and being elected to the city council there, he felt welcomed and respected by his colleagues. This example demonstrated how city council camaraderie may vary based on the composition and individual attitudes of the city council members. Research described a sense of mistrust for individuals who hold differing policy core beliefs, with interactions becoming adversarial at times (Weible, 2005). However, study participants noted how mutual respect and fulfillment of their public service role aided collaboration and allowed the respective city councils to make decisions in the best interest of the communities.

The interaction between each of the city councils represented in this study confirmed previous research conducted by Conover and Feldman (1981). A city council member's chosen party affiliation does not automatically result in a strong negative relationship with another party affiliation. The study revealed individual city council member attitudes and belief systems as the determining factors in whether or not the city council remained productive. Historically, public officials at all levels who displayed a

liberal view were more likely to support environmental policies (Lybecker et al., 2013). The nonpartisan basis of city council roles also offered insight into why CVAG city council policy actions did not align with the ideologies of a specific party affiliation. This fact suggested a degree of sociotropic thinking on the part of city council members; they put more focus on representing constituents as members of the city council rather than strictly the ideals of their political affiliation (Mutz & Mondak, 1997). The described interaction and cooperation also countered the idea that members of one political party do not form coalitions with members of another political party (Serritzlew, Blom-Hansen, & Skjaeveland, 2010).

The educational importance of boards and commissions was evidenced within the study's findings. As noted by the Institute for Local Government (2009), boards and commissions play a critical role with regard to advisory services on relevant topics. City council members obtained pertinent and applicable knowledge and shared this insight with their colleagues. This process enabled the city councils to make educated decisions regardless of party affiliation on environmental initiatives. Findings from this study also indicated that city councils with an uneven distribution of party affiliates may still come to agreement on environmental policy discussions. Despite differences in opinion, policy core beliefs may change as experiences bring new knowledge and insight, thus illustrating ACF's second path to change (Weible et al., 2009).

Participants displayed an understanding of ecological literacy and its importance to continued sustainability in terms of developing strategic partnerships and creating a knowledgeable citizen base (Goleman et al., 2012; Manitoba, n. d.). Developing a greater

sense of ecological literacy within the communities added to the educational aspect of environmental policy discussions. Participating city council members felt a critical need to teach the affected community why they chose to enact specific environmental policies as well as how to change community behaviors through effective and efficient processes during implementation. These small behavioral changes lead to significant impacts when combined (Hobson, 2013). In some instances, city council members recognized that they also needed additional and trustworthy information to make the most ecologically sound decision for their respective communities. This acknowledgment counteracts Grundig's (2009) argument that public officials may act on persuasive yet inaccurate data due to a lack of sufficient knowledge. Other literature reviewed on the concept of ecological literacy emphasized the interdependent relationship of all things in nature, as nature plays a significant role in the development of sustainable communities. Thus, creating an ecological paradigm shift has the potential to enhance the understanding of the limitations of earth's resources and how best to use those available to benefit the community (Goleman et al., 2012; Manitoba, n. d.). In concert with sustainable community development, participants spoke of the shift to a more proactive approach with regard to environmental preservation and conservation.

### **Policy Considerations**

The second research question included methods used and factors considered during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation. Overall, the results indicated alignment with Kooiman and Jentoft's (2009) conclusion that individual principles and values highly influence governance. An element of ACF also holds that

personal beliefs represent the primary factor behind political actions (Weible et al., 2009). The study confirmed the reasoning found within the literature as participating city council members described the importance of their morals and values when making environmental policy decisions.

Participating city council members did not necessarily align with a specific advocacy coalition but likened their involvement with the city council itself or associated boards and commissions as comparable to an advocacy group. This observation represents the assumption of ACF concerning the accomplishment of goals through coordination within a group sharing mutual policy core beliefs (Weible, 2005; Weible et al., 2009). In this instance, city council members used the city council as a means to collaborate in an effort to strategize and shape policy actions.

Additionally, city council members within CVAG demonstrated a strong environmental ethic and displayed the critical balance of components of environmental concern as identified in previous research: social altruism, biospheric values, and egoism (Alibeli & White, 2011; Stern & Dietz, 1994). Participating city council members demonstrated these characteristics by providing relevant examples of environmental policies that impacted the quality of life for the communities. Examples included air quality, water conservation, multispecies habitat, renewable energy, and the creation and maintenance of green spaces. City council members not only considered the impacts of environmental policy decisions in the short term, but also thought on a long-term planning scale. Unlike Paavola's (2008) report on RCT, city council members within CVAG did attribute weight to scientific research and results of environmental



assessments prior to taking environmental policy actions, which also speaks to their environmental ethic.

Community benefit ranked as the primary factor considered by city council members within CVAG. The community benefit aspect of decision making reinforced “the public good” as noted by Morrell (2009). RCT maintains that agents act in the best interest of the principal (Bevir, 2011). In this instance, city council members (agent) accurately represented the needs of the communities (principal) they served. However, all of the characteristics of RCT did not apply. Participating city council members reported values or “the right thing to do” as more important than self-interest or utility maximization (Bhattacharyya, Pattanaik, & Yongsheng, 2011; Bossert & Suzumura, 2011; Grundig, 2009) in most policy situations. The slightest evidence of self-interest identified in this study revolved around each city council member taking action on environmental policies supported by constituents.

Results showed the cost factor as a close second to community benefit. In concert with previous research, city council members looked at the policy implications from both the standpoint of the municipality and community-at-large (Shwom et al., 2010). Cost-benefit scenarios, as seen with the tiered water rates example, influenced city council member decisions (Jones, 2010). City council members considered current costs as well as anticipated costs for long-term goals (Kingdon, 2011) and related performance metrics. Budget constraints remained an issue for some CVAG cities as discovered during this study; these city councils did not deem the costs of particular environmental initiatives as fiscally responsible behavior.

Additionally, city council members revealed the impact of religious beliefs and public participation within the policy process. Religious views played a role in how at least two city council members assessed environmental policy situations; these participants used their interpretation of religious scriptures to support environmental concern (Barker & Bearce, 2012). Participating city council members showed considerable interest in public opinion and participation. This fact evidenced the correlation to city council decisions in that community voices were heard and decisions made in the best interest of those directly affected (Kingdon, 2011; Shwom et al., 2010).

### **Support for Conceptual Framework**

This phenomenological investigation was centered on the conceptual framework of advocacy coalition with rational choice as a contrasting model. Within the interview protocol, questions 3 and 9 provided the necessary data related to the conceptual framework. Participant interpretations and responses received for questions 2 and 7 also offered applicable data. The most basic assumption of ACF maintains that personal beliefs are used as the primary factor behind political actions (Weible et al., 2009). Participant responses coincided with this assumption; all participants relied heavily on personal values, which aligned with their deep core and policy core beliefs when making decisions on environmental policy.

Members of an advocacy coalition trustingly work together to influence policies. Generally, coalition members share the same policy core beliefs and do not form coalitions with members of another political party (Serritzlew, Blom-Hansen, & Skjaeveland, 2010). In this instance, city council members equated the city council itself

or associated boards and commissions to an advocacy coalition. This detail allowed city council members to work together for the benefit of the respective community. Despite different political ideologies, city council members showed mutual respect for one another's viewpoints. Additionally, at least two participants referred to the use of information provided by outside advocacy groups after the completion of confirmatory research.

Principle theorists equated rational choice to the principal-agent problem where agent incentives created conflicts of interest. When applying this concept to this study, it might be interpreted as the city council member (agent) making decisions for the benefit of the city (principal). Literature maintained that political decisions made using RCT rely heavily on practical assumptions of self-interest and utility maximization (Grundig, 2009). With respect to environmental policy decisions, RCT does not require scientific evidence or assessments of the potential impact to the area (Paavola, 2008). Participating city council members emphasized community benefit as a critical element to environmental policy decisions but used subject matter expertise in making those decisions. Participants did not identify or imply self-interest as a significant influence.

Another element of rational choice includes political decisions made based on short term interests without any consideration of fiscal responsibility (Bevir, 2011). Participants did identify fiscal concerns as a factor considered during all policy decisions and not just environmental. Additionally, the agency representative confirmed the issue of affordability of environmental initiatives as a deciding factor by recounting fiscal

constraints of some cities within CVAG. This observation provided insight into participant behaviors, which did not align strictly with RCT.

This study provided sufficient evidence of the preference of city council members to use advocacy coalition rather than rational choice when making environmental policy decisions. City council members collaborated and discussed all avenues of policy action with community benefit and cost as the primary influential factors. The ACF supports groups working together who share mutual beliefs and understand the role of science in environmental policy decisions. The city councils represented within this study fit into that model.

### **Limitations**

A major limitation of this study resulted from the low participation rate of city council members. I could only secure responses from five of my original targeted participants. Upon approval, I expanded my participant pool to include respective city staff members who have a direct role in the policy process, either as a subject matter expert or policy writer. The participating city staff member had first-hand knowledge of city council member attitudes and behaviors. CVAG serves as a public service agency; I recruited one of the representatives who had knowledge of environmental policy discussions across the region. This representative provided insight to the general attitudes and behaviors displayed by all city council members within CVAG. I was informed no change to my IRB application was required due to the nature of the agency's business. Given this input, I anticipated the primary factors considered by city council members

across the board would remain the same; yet, a greater span of examples of environmental initiatives may have been revealed.

The diversity of the cities also created a limitation for my study. Unbeknownst to me, some cities continued to have budget constraints, which prevented them from implementing environmental policies presented and discussed during CVAG meetings. This fact may have also limited direct participation from city council members. Additionally, the exact political make-up and attitudes of specific city councils could not be assessed in the study findings because I only had direct responses from four of the 10 cities.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations for further research have been devised based upon the public policy and environmental literature reviewed as well as the experience gained from conducting this study. Research could be conducted to change the focus from city council members to the community-at-large. For example, questions related to community concerns of an environmental nature could be posed, as well as whether or not the community felt the city council was fully supporting relevant environmental interests. This type of study would continue investigation based on ACF by incorporating citizens' policy core beliefs. Another avenue of investigation involves the extension of the study's boundaries. By expanding to a larger participant pool, a researcher could do comparison cases between multiple regions within the State of California. Would other regions also follow ACF or be more inclined to pursue RCT in environmental policy discussions?

Both studies would provide insight into the more environmentally-progressive areas of California and ascertain the influence of community support for relevant policies.

### **Implications**

This study detailed the lived experiences of city council members and factors considered during environmental policy discussion, development, and implementation.

Implications for social change expand upon the study findings.

1. City council members more fully recognize the importance of enhanced awareness and educational programs that are crucial to successful implementation of environmental policies.
2. City council members more fully recognize and understand the weight of factors considered during environmental policy discussions.
3. City council members more fully understand how and why environmental policy decisions are made by increasing their level of ecological literacy.
4. City council members more fully recognize how differences in political affiliation do not automatically result in differences of opinion with regard to environmental policies.

My recommendations for practice center on the awareness and educational programs, which provide the greatest benefit for the effort. City council members and citizens need to be made aware and educated on the “hows” and “whys” of environmental policies that affect their everyday lives. City council members may then take all the relevant knowledge gained and use a balance of factors to enact the best possible decision for the community. A balance of factors from cost and morals to benefit and ideology

exist in all policy decisions. Determining the correct balance in each policy instance remains critical to its success. With more awareness and educational programs come more informed decisions, which benefits all parties involved.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation focused on the lived experiences of city council members as well as the weight of factors considered during environmental policy discussions. Using all relevant knowledge and making decisions that enhance the quality of life for the citizen base remains a critical element of city management. As leaders within the respective communities, city council members have the responsibility of being proactive with regards to global climate change impacts inside their purview. The cohesive effort noted within the Coachella Valley region of Southern California might influence notable environmental policy changes in surrounding areas. Additionally, the lived experiences explained during this study characterize the attitudes and behaviors required for successful implementation of environmental initiatives. Mutual respect despite political affiliation will continue to secure positive social change and encourage political action in support of sustainable initiatives.

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## Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Council Member \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Bobbie Brown, a doctoral candidate attending Walden University. I am writing to request your participation in a qualitative study regarding the experiences and influences of city council members as they discuss, evaluate, and implement environmental policies. The study may include a recorded interview session at your office location or other chosen setting to obtain data for analysis. If you prefer, you may answer the questionnaire on your own time and return it to me prior to 11 July 2014. If interviewed, you will be given an opportunity to review the findings based upon interview transcripts at a later date and make any necessary adjustments. I may request an additional interview session or follow-up phone call should further clarification be warranted.

Please read the attached informed consent agreement and respond via email no later than 2 July 2014. I greatly appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your participation in this highly relevant and important study.

Very respectfully,

Bobbie A. Brown

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Agreement

You are invited to take part in a research study regarding experiences and influences considered during environmental policy decision-making at the local government level. The researcher is inviting city council members who have held the position for at least one year to be in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Bobbie Brown, who is a doctoral student attending Walden University.

### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of council members and identify influential factors considered during decisions to develop and implement environmental policies in Southern California’s Coachella Valley region.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in one interview session lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
- Verify transcript findings and make adjustments if necessary.
- Participate in a follow-up interview session or phone call if clarifications are needed.
- Or, complete and submit questionnaire via email within allotted time frame.

Here are some sample questions:

- How would you describe your experience as a council member?
- How would you describe environmental concern?
- What specific factors do you consider when discussing environmental policies?
- Describe your membership to or inclination to align with a particular advocacy coalition, if any.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. You may stop at any time and refrain from answering questions at your discretion.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Participation involves minimal risk and should not cause any stress outside of the normal course of business. Being in this study will not pose any risk to your safety or wellbeing. As a participant in this study, you will provide helpful insight into the local environmental policy process.

### **Conflicts of Interest:**

No previous relationship exists between the researcher and anticipated participants.

### **Payment:**

There should be no expectation of payment for participating in this study.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports; Research Participant A and so forth will be used in the analysis. Data will be kept secure by locking all audio recordings within a lock box and maintaining password-protected working files. Data will be kept for a period of at least five years as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at [bobbie.brown2@waldenu.edu](mailto:bobbie.brown2@waldenu.edu) or phone at 760-888-7200. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 06-24-14-0328816 and it expires on June 23, 2015.

Please save this informed consent agreement for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information, and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to this email with the words, "I consent", I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Project: Experiences and Influences of City Council Members in Environmental Policy

Decision-Making

Time of interview:

Date of interview:

Location of interview:

Interviewer: Bobbie A. Brown

Interviewee:

Gender:

Years of council service:

Political affiliation:

Education level:

Occupation:

Questions:

1. How would you describe your experience as a council member?
2. How would you describe your experience in environmental policy development, decision-making, and implementation?







## Curriculum Vitae

Bobbie A. Brown, CDFM, MAFM, MPA

## Education:

Doctor of Philosophy – Public Policy and Administration  
Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Expected 2015

Master of Science – Public Administration  
DeVry University, Chicago, Illinois

2008

Master of Science – Accounting and Financial Management  
DeVry University, Chicago, Illinois

2007

Bachelor of Science – Accounting, Finance, and Banking  
Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina

2003

## Professional Experience:

## Supervisory Financial Manager

Department of Navy, United States Marine Corps, Twentynine Palms, CA  
2009-Present

Supervise financial staff of 6 and oversee funding distribution; budget formulation, execution, and justification; account analysis; and funding document preparation in accordance with federal budget and accounting standards. Interpret and provide advice on policies and regulations. Facilitate budget section training sessions and coordinate financial management courses with outside contractors. Conduct one-on-one training sessions with new employees. Lead initiative to create and maintain standard operating procedure manuals for future reference and instruction.

## Financial Management Analyst

Department of Navy, United States Marine Corps, Twentynine Palms, CA  
2008-2009

Perform account analysis and funding document preparation in accordance with federal budget and accounting standards. Assist with special projects and provide financial advice to program managers and section leaders.

## Financial Technician

Department of Navy, United States Marine Corps, Twentynine Palms, CA  
2005-2008

Perform daily audit and account reconciliation. Provide financial assistance to command staff. Create standard operating procedural manual for future reference and instruction. Review and edit outgoing correspondence for Fiscal Officer.

## Accounting Technician

Department of Navy, United States Marine Corps, Twentynine Palms, CA

2004-2005

Balance general ledger accounts for payroll and credit card transactions. Audit time cards and complete payroll process for approximately 600 employees.

Certifications:

Certified Defense Financial Manager, CDFM #6812

Certified

Professional Affiliations:

Member, American Society of Military Comptrollers

Member, American Society for Public Administration

Member, Pi Alpha Alpha

References:

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Director, Resources Group

Department of Navy, United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Systems Command

Nancy Horn

Budget Officer

Department of Navy, United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center