



Procurement is not just transactional, it is collaborative. By embracing procurement's strategic role, municipalities can drive better outcomes and stronger partnerships. *Photo: Adobe Stock*

# Strategic Procurement

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## The backbone of municipal success

by Victoria Mirlocca

Streamline processes. Mitigate risks. Find co-operative solutions. These crucial priorities for municipalities are also core strengths of procurement professionals.

Procurement is not just transactional, it is collaborative. By embracing procurement's strategic role, municipalities can drive better outcomes and stronger partnerships. Strategic procurement:

- helps efficiently manage financial and human resources
- drives mission-critical initiatives like housing and emergency preparedness
- increases collaboration and innovation

According to Rahul Kulkarni, senior buyer at the City of Burlington, procurement professionals "touch every part of the business" to optimize services and use of resources.

For example, in Burlington, procurement streamlined the building permitting process with AI-driven software; in Simcoe County, it ensured a steady supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

By leveraging procurement as a strategic asset, municipalities can increase efficiency, resilience, and innovation.

### Pioneering Approach to Housing: City of Burlington

Housing shortages and delayed permits are issues for municipalities across Canada. In Burlington, reviewing development applications was a time-consuming, manual process. It took up to six months for building approvals,

causing bottlenecks and increasing housing costs.

Burlington's procurement team decided to find a permitting solution.

"Procurement wasn't involved, Kulkarni said. "Procurement initiated this."

The city's proactive approach highlights how shifting procurement's role from reactive and transactional to strategic and collaborative can transform outcomes.

The procurement team issued a global request for information to identify AI-driven software that could automate and expedite the permitting process, then co-ordinated with the planning, IT, and building departments to ensure the chosen software aligned with the city's needs and integrated smoothly with existing systems.

This collaborative effort was crucial to successful implementation. Procurement also expertly negotiated the agreement with the software vendor to address concerns over legal jurisdiction and long-term pricing.

The groundbreaking AI software features transformed Burlington's permitting process:

- **Automated zoning and land use analysis** – Instant assessment of bylaw compliance.
- **3D visualization** – Real-time checking of zoning and building codes.
- **Instant feedback** – Reviews completed in seconds.

With procurement's leadership, Burlington's permitting timeline went from months to weeks.

"Procurement plays a huge role in saving money and bringing transparency that people truly appreciate," Kulkarni said.

Burlington's success shows how procurement can transform municipal processes, making communities more resilient and responsive to challenges like housing shortages.

### Procurement Saves the Day: County of Simcoe

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, municipalities everywhere faced the urgent need to secure essential supplies, especially PPE.

In Simcoe County, the demand for PPE skyrocketed, and supply chains were stretched to their limits. Procurement services were urgently needed, even among a sudden shift to remote work for the team.

"It was literally 48 hours from the time that we [left] our office to being fully operational online," said Catherine Payne, Simcoe County procurement team lead. "During COVID, our folks did such a great job. Not once did we experience a shortage."

Procurement professionals became the backbone of the county's strategy, working tirelessly to source critical supplies, navigate remote operations, and maintain a steady flow of goods. Key strategies included:

- **Prioritization** – Ensuring PPE and essential supplies for long-term care homes and paramedic services.
- **Collaboration** – Partnering with infection control teams and the Emergency Operations Centre,

creating a list of all local and global businesses and working with each.

- **Supplier relationships** – Tapping trusted networks to secure supplies quickly and ensure quality in a market flooded with counterfeit products.
- **Process innovation** – Developing faster approval workflows and robust expenditure tracking to manage the rapid pace of procurement during the crisis.
- **Inventory management** – Forecasting and distributing supplies efficiently to ensure a continuous supply for frontline workers.

Simcoe's procurement team ensured an uninterrupted supply of critical goods, kept frontline workers protected with high-quality PPE, and controlled costs despite global shortages.

Their efforts also fostered better collaboration across departments and showcased procurement's vital role in crisis management. They succeeded, despite the sudden transition to a fully remote work and a market filled with, as Payne says, "an abundance of poor-quality products at really insane prices."

Simcoe's experience offers crucial takeaways for other municipalities:

- **Stay agile** – Rapid adaptation is essential during crises, as is having a backup resource plan to allow time for key staff to rest.
- **Think strategically** – Procurement is not just a transaction, it is a driver of success.
- **Collaborate** – Cross-department partnerships are vital.
- **Leverage technology** – Digital tools improve efficiency.
- **Value relationships** – Strong supplier networks are crucial during disruptions.

Simcoe's story underscores how procurement can turn a crisis into an opportunity for innovation and resilience.

### Roadmap for Municipal Success

Procurement professionals are strategic partners, not back-office functionaries.

When procurement teams are involved early in project planning, they can do so much more than just buy goods and services – they become a catalyst for innovation.

"People don't really understand the full value that we bring to the table," Payne said.



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Municipal leaders should empower teams to think outside the traditional “design-bid-build” model. Early supplier engagement can uncover cost-saving opportunities and spark creative solutions.

Procurement is a problem-solving powerhouse. In the past, procurement training was about rigid tasks and procedures. Today, it is focused on fostering strategic thinking and adaptability.

This shift allows procurement professionals to challenge outdated practices and implement impactful processes.

“Continuous learning is crucial,” Payne said. “It keeps us informed of changes in legislation, regulations, contract law, and emerging technologies that can impact or benefit the organization.”

Investing in procurement staff’s professional growth – whether that is attending conferences, pursuing certifications, or other learning opportunities – goes a long way. This enhances both individual expertise and the entire municipality’s resilience and strategic resources.

By empowering staff, municipalities set themselves up for success.

## Addressing Workforce Challenges

Procurement is a gamechanger when it comes to tackling workforce challenges.

If you address procurement workforce gaps first, with targeted recruitment and professional development, your procurement team can support the health of your whole workforce. Some key workforce challenges and procurement’s role are outlined below:

- **Attract and retain talent** – Procurement can benchmark compensation, source technologies for flexible work, and secure wellness programs.
- **Develop skills and expertise** – Procurement can source training programs and implement knowledge-sharing systems to ensure employees have growth opportunities.
- **Promote diversity and inclusion** – Procurement can drive supplier

diversity and secure diversity training to create a more inclusive workplace.

- **Boost employee engagement** – Procurement can find solutions for recognition programs, engagement surveys, and feedback mechanisms to improve workplace satisfaction.

## Optimizing Procurement for Success

To truly unlock procurement’s potential, municipalities must shift their mindset:

- **Involve procurement early** – Procurement professionals provide valuable market insights and cost-saving strategies.
- **Recognize procurement as strategic** – Procurement is not just transactional, it is essential to success.
- **Foster collaboration** – Procurement teams can open communication across departments to ensure alignment with broader goals.
- **Leverage technology** – Procurement can source modern tools to enhance efficiency and decision-making.

Municipalities should also:

- **Invest in people** – Prioritize professional development to keep procurement teams ahead of industry trends.
- **Encourage innovation** – Empower procurement teams to explore new ideas and technologies.
- **Value contribution** – Recognize the impact of procurement to foster motivation.
- **Commit to continuous improvement** – Regularly evaluate and refine procurement processes for better results.

In a rapidly evolving landscape, procurement is the backbone of municipal success. By adopting these strategies, municipalities can transform procurement into a strategic force that shapes efficient, resilient, innovative communities.



Victoria Mirlocca is Chair, Board of Directors, Ontario Public Buyers Association.

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