



TECHNICAL PAPER NO. 7

THE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

by Mike Bartusek

Public involvement in projects has changed over the years. People are more aware of construction projects in their areas and want more input. When I started in this business many years ago, the public involvement process meant that you asked the public what their opinion was after the project was built. Today the public truly wants involvement and ownership in projects. It is not enough to show them the final plans and ask for input at that stage. With the tightening of budgets brought on by Amendment I as well as other local financial cutbacks, it is imperative that average citizens understand what they are getting for their tax dollars.

A good public involvement process starts with adequate publicity about the project. The best place to start is with local neighborhood groups - that is, neighbors telling neighbors. Other ways to communicate information are:

- Post notices around neighborhoods
- Place concise articles in local newspapers
- Place information in neighborhood group newsletters
- Place articles in local school newsletters
- Mail notices to households adjacent to the project

Notices and mailings should be sent within two weeks of the public meeting to allow enough time for scheduling but not so much that it is forgotten. A meeting place should be chosen close to the project area, such as school auditoriums, public libraries, town halls, or other private facilities such as VFW halls, etc.

For small meetings, plans and exhibits placed around the room seem to work well. For larger meetings, and overhead projector is a good tool. For large groups and complex projects, a slide presentation showing similar types of projects will give the citizens a better understanding of the project. Handouts are a must for all public

meetings; the people need information that they can take home with them.

Finally, we have dropped the ball on many projects by not keeping citizens informed of changes which occur during the project. Most projects involve some small changes which don't affect the overall costs or make-up of the project. However, occasionally major unforeseen items arise during design or construction which must be addressed, such as unrecorded buried oil tanks or, say, unworkable baggage systems. If the public is kept informed about major necessary cost revisions, they are less likely to oppose future projects. As in any business, communication is the key and unfortunately too many of us engineers lack the personal touch in dealing with people.

In summary, don't be afraid to talk to citizens. If necessary, take communication classes. More can be accomplished by working with interested citizens instead of fighting against them.



BLEIKER ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Hans Bleiker, public participation guru and founder of the Institute for Participatory Management & Planning, has several very perceptive observations on the public education and participation process. One of his key observations relates to the need for *informed consent* of all key parties for a high-profile public project to be a success.

Public project decision-making processes often follow a predictable course which can be outlined as:

1. Define the Problem
2. Set Goals and Objectives
3. Analyze the System
4. Generate Alternatives Solutions
5. Predict the Impacts of Each Solution
6. Evaluate the Alternative Impacts
7. Decision-Makers Choose a Course of Action
8. ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE!

The above outcome is often inevitable because the project proponents fail to gain the consent of all of the key players, including the public, even though the standard "public education" activities may have been performed. Rather than struggling to get *consensus* for a proposed action from a disparate group of adversaries, our goal should be to get *informed consent* for the project. Bleiker defines informed consent as "the grudging willingness of opponents to (grudgingly) to along with a course of action that they are actually still opposed to." Our objective should not necessarily be to get all parties to wholeheartedly agree with our proposal, but rather to get everyone to the point where they will at least shut up and move out of the way long enough for us to get our job done.

There are four key steps to laying the foundation of informed consent. These consist of making sure that all potentially affected interests understand:

1. There is a serious problem, or an important opportunity, that just has to be addressed.
2. You are the right entity to address it. In fact, it would be irresponsible for you, with the mission that you have, not to address it.
3. The approach you are taking to the problem is reasonable, sensible, and responsible.

THE PARABLE OF THE ORANGES



Two women converged on the produce section of the local grocery store looking for fresh oranges. They found only one lonely orange. A great debate ensued over which lady deserved the last

orange. When the volume of the debate reached a level at which the other customers were being disturbed, the store manager arrived on the scene to mediate the dispute.

One said she deserved it because she was more beautiful; the other argued that she deserved it because she had more children to feed. The first responded that she deserved it because she gave more to charity; and the other claimed that she deserved it because she was the supermarket's best customer. Demonstrating the Wisdom of Solomon, the store manager got a knife and cut the orange in half, giving one half to each of the women. The first woman went home, carefully cut the peel off of her half of the orange, threw away the peel, and ate the fruit. The second woman went home, carefully cut the peel off of her half of the orange, threw away the fruit, and grated the peel for use in her favorite dessert.

Moral - Effective public education requires not only that we fully understand and clearly communicate our own motivations and objectives, but that we also listen to and understand the motivations and objectives of all other interested parties.