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Best practice community engagement for infrastructure projects: Building community ties that dig deeper

Andrew Buckley

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BEST PRACTICE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS
– Building Community Ties That Dig Deeper

ANDREW BUCKLEY

Building strong and effective relationships with local communities and other important stakeholders is now recognised as an integral part of any infrastructure project, from large-scale resource projects and major transport infrastructure, to the development of local community facilities.

Ignoring or poorly managing community concerns has the potential to impose costly time and financial delays, or even stop a project in its tracks. Worse still, not involving communities in project development can have serious long-term negative impacts on a community's economic, environmental or social situation.

Establishing dialogue and building trust within a community can be a difficult task, but is vitally important for organisations who will have a long-term interest in the communities in which they operate.

ENGAGE EARLY, ENGAGE OFTEN

Community engagement can occur at any stage of a project, from the feasibility and concept stages right through to the operational phase, and practical decisions must be made in relation to the level of community engagement required for a given project. Typically, the level of engagement is based on the level of impact the project is expected to have on a community.

The inherent risk involved is underestimating the potential impact of a project and proceeding without community involvement, which increases the likelihood of negative long-term impacts on the community.

Just as safety and environmental considerations have become of paramount importance, the risks associated with adversely affecting local communities are too great to be ignored, and project proponents must meet a range of community engagement standards, as a means to avoid or mitigate risk. Hence the reason feasibility studies must consider not only financial and environmental impacts, but also the short and long-term social and community impacts.

Planning and design processes are far more likely to be aligned with community views if there is consultation to ensure that concerns and issues are directly reflected in concept development, and feedback is provided on how this input influenced the decision.

Engaging with key stakeholders during the early stages of a project assists in establishing strong relationships that can continue throughout the construction and operational phase.

This can enable significant changes to be made throughout the project to better suit local needs. The earlier in the process the community is involved, the more likely the final outcomes will be aligned with community values and expectations, and risks can be addressed before they develop into larger issues.

Establishing the project's community credentials early is certainly a contributing factor in the ongoing goodwill towards any project. Equally, engagement should remain a dynamic process that includes feedback throughout all stages of the project.

Regular engagement activities at each stage of a project are more likely to reveal important issues and provide valuable information as the project develops.

COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

In Australia, highly sophisticated communities demand transparent and effective processes that enable involvement in decision-making. Increasingly, community input is expected, and in many cases demanded, at the very early stages of a project's design.

The community needs to understand the full implications of a project before construction begins (if not much earlier), so there is opportunity for concerns to be raised and addressed.

As an example, a worse case scenario would be coal-fired power station dropped in the middle of a community, which could cause severe health impacts on nearby residents. On the other end of the scale, a small local

road project may remove a single tree with negative impacts for a single resident.

A critical element of any community engagement is to ensure the process is genuine and involves a process that allows true communication between the project and the community. Make sure people understand what is up for negotiation, and how they can influence or have input into the decision-making process.

Taking predetermined decisions or outcomes to the community under the guise of 'consultation' would inevitably lead to erosion of any goodwill. Predetermined outcomes tend to infiltrate their way into the structure, approach and details of a consultation program, and communities are highly critical of engagement they perceive as a token gesture.

MANAGING ENGAGEMENT DURING CONSTRUCTION

By the time a project is ready to commence construction, communication options can become limited to simply informing communities of decisions already made.

However, community engagement during construction will usually have some degree of involving and collaborating with the community by keeping communities informed, and providing a commitment to listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how the community's input influenced decisions.

Both communication and construction team members need to ensure they are aware of, and committed to, the project's policy for communication to local stakeholders. Contractors are typically under time and cost pressures to deliver certain works and can overlook the project's communication requirements and, indeed, the consequences of not notifying impacted residents, businesses or other stakeholders.

This awareness needs to begin at site inductions, which should include a briefing on communication and community engagement, and then be reinforced to site crews and subcontractors at daily pre-start meetings or as

part of regular site toolbox talks.

In addition, communication officers need to ensure notification timeframes are reinforced at construction team meetings and during discussions about potential works.

While taking preventative measures is always preferable to reactively managing issues and complaints, the daily reality is that disruptions and disturbances are unavoidable with large-scale infrastructure projects, and complaints are inevitable.

The best way to manage community complaints is to develop, in conjunction with the construction team, justifiable and defendable positions for the purpose behind certain activities.

Many issues that are difficult for the communication team to address initially, are discussed in depth at construction team meetings and solutions are developed to minimise disruption and also enable construction to proceed as required.

The project team is far more likely to successfully manage and resolve all complaints and enquires by providing factual and justifiable information. Although some community members will remain dissatisfied with a situation, in many cases the community will understand that the project is in fact also concerned about the impacts it is having, and is seeking to manage and resolve their concerns.

This approach of establishing dialogue and effective processes for addressing complaints, builds trust, which is a highly effective tool for ensuring a successful project.

The days of handing out earplugs to sleepless residents are well and truly over, and local communities expect to be treated with respect. Genuine community engagement is a gesture of goodwill shown to those who have to bear the brunt of negative impacts from an activity or a project.

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ANDREW BUCKLEY

Andrew has extensive experience in the planning and delivery of community engagement for infrastructure and development projects. Working with local councils, state governments and private organisations, his practical knowledge, creative leadership and passion for success combine to deliver impressive results. He continues to develop his specialist capability in community engagement across a range of industries, including transport, resources, water and community facilities.