



Social and Economic Education for Development

Some Principles for Addressing Resistance to Controversial Development Projects

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Introduction

Recent revisions in Kentucky's solid waste management regulations pose new challenges for communities and regulators. While existing landfills are closing because they do not and can not meet new environmental safety requirements, the public is not willing to act to avoid a solid waste crisis. One study of Canadian waste management engineers found that they believe that "public opposition is their most important problem, that it will remain so and that they are ill-prepared to deal with it" (Connor and Svendsen, 1986). In all likelihood, this feeling is shared by their counterparts in Kentucky.

Connor and Svendsen (1986) suggest that waste management generates considerable negative public reaction for several reasons.

- * Disposal of waste is an essential service but one that most of us prefer not to think about for too long.
- * The management of waste is shifting from a "bury it and forget it" strategy to a diverse set of complex technological alternatives.
- * Increasingly our wastes contain potentially hazardous components, which if handled improperly, can pose serious health and environmental risks to nearby residents.
- * Public trust in science, technology, experts, and government is at an all time low and assertions that new approaches to managing waste are safe and reliable are met with considerable skepticism.

What all this means is that proposals for the siting of new landfills, or the introduction of new technologies (e.g., incinerators, resource extraction facilities) to manage hazardous and

other municipal wastes are viewed as LULUs (locally unwanted land uses) and greeted with cries of outrage and NIMBY (Not in My Backyard!). The question that confronts state regulators, local governments, and citizens is this: Is there a process for siting locally undesirable waste management facilities that can acknowledge and respond to community concerns in a systematic and cost effective manner? At times, it may seem that the answer is no. But if we can't find a way to answer yes, then the future will be one of community resistance, conflict, litigation, and a solid waste problem that simply gets bigger -- not resolved.

Community Concerns

NIMBY -- Not in My Backyard -- the reaction of a community or neighborhood to the news that it has been selected to host a waste management facility often seems irrational and selfish to regulators. But while at one level, the public and individual citizens may acknowledge and understand the need for a new waste management facility, this is at an abstract level. The reality that it will be here, in our community, in my neighborhood, alters our understanding of this abstraction. What issues underlie the NIMBY response?

Perceived Risks - Most of us have little or no knowledge of what happens to our garbage after it is picked up by the truck, but most of us are aware of contamination incidents from waste management techniques that have failed or been inadequate to begin with. The lack of knowledge in the first area combined with the knowledge of the second leads to a heightened perception of biophysical risk.

These concerns over health and safety are amplified by a fear over the loss of property values due to the siting of a facility. The same media stories of biophysical problems associated with waste management facilities

also demonstrate the economic consequences for nearby residents. For most people, their single most valuable asset is their home, and the perception that this asset will be threatened by a new facility enhances the sense of risk.

What is critical to remember is: "Things that are defined as real are real in their consequences." If the residents of a community or neighborhood believe that a risk to health or the environment is posed by a proposed waste management facility, or believe that their property values will decline, the resulting fear is real and consequential.

Perceived Inequities - A waste management facility provides services to a wider community than the one hosting it. As a result, there is a sense that some people are being asked to bear a disproportionate share of the risks and costs of such a facility while many others enjoy the benefits of "out of sight, out of mind, out of risk." This is especially true when the facility will provide services to a geographic area larger than my community. While individuals may be willing to bear a greater share of costs for their neighbors, this willingness to sacrifice evaporates for faceless, nameless, others.

Fueling this perception of inequity is the official perspective on compensation. While compensation is offered to those directly affected by a new facility (e.g., whose property will be taken to build the site or the road to the site), there is no mechanism for acknowledging with compensation the "spillover" effects of a waste management facility. My land might not have been used to build the facility, but since the trucks hauling waste to the site now go past my home, 24 hours a day, day-in and day-out, should I be compensated for this change in my neighborhood?

Perceived Loss of Control - Increasingly, decisions about waste management are being made at a regional or state level. This leads to a perceived loss of community control over decisions that will produce substantive changes in the character and quality of community life. This perception is fueled when critical decisions are made on purely technical or scientific criteria without an effort to make these criteria understandable to the general public or, without an effort to incorporate community concerns as part of the decision-making criteria.

Connor and Svendsen (1986) argue that the regulatory decision-making process itself heightens the sense of a loss of control. Their argument is as follows:

Management by crisis occurs when proponents create or accept severe time constraints which make it impossible to deal effectively with the concerns of the public and their desire to provide meaningful input to the waste management plan. As a result, arbitrary decisions are made by specialists and politicians behind closed doors about sites and methods...Strangely, when there is no time to do the job right, there always seems to be time later to do it over again. Associated with management by crisis is "schizophrenic management". While the technical side of a project is designed and managed in a rational, scientific and professional manner, yet the problematic public side of the project is dealt with in a totally ad hoc, reactive and unplanned fashion...[Finally] Over legalization occurs when a complex legal process prevents the meeting of minds and fosters an adversarial climate and an endless series of moves and countermoves. In many cases, legislation constrains a more open process amongst the parties and with the public, e.g., the formal hearing process with evidence under oath and cross examination by counsel.

To paraphrase an old joke: Are you really only perceiving a loss of control over consequential decisions that affect your life and the future of your community if the decision-making process is structured to minimize public participation and by definition, excludes public concerns as criteria for decision-making? Decisions about where to site a waste management facility and the method(s) of disposal and/or management of waste are not just technical decisions. They are political decisions for at their heart these are decisions about people's lives and their power to exercise influence over their lives.

So, what's a manager to do?

It is very easy for program managers and technical experts to fall into the trap of simply dismissing public concerns as only misperceptions, ignorance, or self-interest. It is easy and costly in time and money. Unfortunately, what often passes for public

involvement in critical decision-making is really just informing the public of a decision that has already been made. Is anyone really surprised that an uproar follows when citizens are informed of a siting decision after the fact, and then presented with a regulatory process that offers no time or place for their concerns to be heard and integrated into the decision-making process?

Public involvement in critical resource management decisions must be as carefully designed and implemented as the technical aspects of the project itself. Failure to do this may doom the project to never getting off the ground or, to massive cost/time overruns.

Public participation must be a part of the decision process from setting the criteria for identifying potential sites; to establishing the criteria for selecting a site; to weighing the evidence for how potential sites match the selection criteria; to identifying alternative waste management approaches; to evaluating the strengths and weaknesses or costs and benefits of alternative systems; to the design and preparation of a site; the construction process; and, throughout the operational life of a facility. At each of these stages, there must be real opportunities for public input and for the public participation to be one of the factors influencing the course of the decision process.

Planning for Public Participation

Public participation must focus on creating a sense of equal partnership in the decision-making process by citizens, advocates and opponents of the project, technical experts, and project managers. The decision-making process, both its technical and public participation components, should be designed so as to:

- * Permit flexibility in project design and implementation;
- * Provide equal access to information in terms that are meaningful;
- * Establish multidirectional channels of communication that are open to both positive and negative comments or information and, permit rapid responses by all participants;

- * Avoid polarizing the affected community(ies) and thereby avoid the "hardening" of positions by all parties, including the initiating agency;
- * Enhance equity and fairness in costs and benefits arising from the project, even if this entails broadening the meaning of compensated costs; and,
- * Institutionalize public participation in decision-making and monitoring of operational facilities by identifying a "public involvement manager" who is a full and equal participant in the project team.

Suggestions for Enhancing Public Participation

Community Scoping

Every community has a history which helps explain the characteristics, attitudes, and motivations of those who live there. It is important to know (a) the sociodemographic and economic characteristics of an affected community, (b) the diversity of organizations and interest groups, © who are positional and reputational leaders, and (d) community attitudes and values. This information can be obtained from secondary sources (e.g., Census), discussions with key informants, analyses of local documents (e.g., the newspaper), or social surveys.

Information Dissemination and Participation Opportunities

Complete information about the proposed project and alternatives must be provided in diverse formats through multiple channels. This includes brochures, open houses, newsletters, radio or television programs, hot lines, conferences, or locating a resource center in the local community. The key is to insure that everyone has access to the same information regardless of their location in the community or their reading skills.

Information dissemination is the first step in creating opportunities for public participation, for it provides a foundation for knowledgeable public participation. At a minimum, several interactive open houses should be held throughout the affected community. This

means that communication is two-way -- all questions are accepted as legitimate and receive a credible responsive answer when posed, or in writing if additional information is required to provide a credible answer.

More desirable is public participation in planning and technical committees. If the waste management decision process is defined from the beginning as a negotiation, then it is logical to have all the interested and affected parties involved from the beginning. Public representatives thus have a structured opportunity to express public concerns and to be partners in the evaluation of site and project alternatives. In places where this strategy has been used, the public representatives then act as community spokespersons for the legitimacy of the decision-making process.

A planning workshop brings together citizens and technical professionals to seek creative solutions to the problem at hand. Participants jointly explore siting or management alternatives according to a common set of criteria -- technical feasibility; economic and social costs and benefits; equity and fairness in distribution of economic and social costs and benefits; and any other criteria agreed to by the participants as credible and measurable. Planning workshops give citizens and project personnel an opportunity to talk through design and siting alternatives in an environment that says all options are open for discussion. Experience suggests that planning workshops can help identify creative solutions or workable compromises, and strengthens the sense among all participants that the outcome is the best alternative.

Conclusions

Public opposition to locally undesirable land uses is inevitable. What is not inevitable is that public opposition gets transformed into community conflict, costly litigation, and a deepening of the public's distrust of professional resource managers. To move public participation from the liability to the asset side of the decision-making ledger requires a commitment to plan for public involvement as carefully as we plan the technical parameters of a waste management project. Do these proposals for enhancing public participation add time to the planning process? Absolutely. Do these proposals for enhancing public participation add costs to the

planning process? Absolutely. But on the scales of getting a project done, we must weigh these costs (in time and money) to integrate citizens into the decision-making process against the costs later on of public opposition. In the past, the resource management process has been "penny wise and pound foolish" because we have failed to understand that what project managers define as routine policy decisions are, in fact, viewed as politically and emotionally charged capricious exercises of bureaucratic power. Recognizing this reality and planning to avoid those actions which appear to substantiate this view is in the best interest of project managers, citizens, communities, and the environment.

References and Suggested Resources

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