

SUCCESS THROUGH PUBLIC PROCESS

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Every successful public project has to navigate its way through a tough course of public opinion, budget challenges, political factors, regulations, and outside influences. To keep the navigation away from hazards, public agencies must exhibit what the marine industry calls situational awareness plus command, control, and communication. Elliott Bay Design Group (EBDG) has been involved in a number of public agency projects. We have helped many of our public clients deal with stakeholder groups, provide answers to tough questions, and show a thoughtful process that results in better transportation solutions.

On a recent project for a state transportation provider (AnyDOT), EBDG worked with the ferry operator to employ the methodology of Systematic Development of Informed Consent (SDIC). This methodology, developed by the Institute for Participatory Management and Planning (the Bleiker Institute) focuses on actively finding those interests with serious opposition, listening to their concerns and taking them from a state of "over-my-dead-body" opposition to a position of informed consent. SDIC is based on over 35 years of research that originated in the 1960's at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Working with a consultant trained in SDIC, EBDG and its client enacted a public process campaign for a new ferry procurement program. The result was approval by the state legislature for funding in excess of \$100 million to construct a new ferry for AnyDOT.

Creating a public process program for a project includes a variety of elements. This may include working meetings, key stakeholder meetings, regional public meetings, a project-specific website and a project survey. One of the first steps a team should take is to identify potentially affected interests to include in the process. These can include transportation users, unions, and regional government, among others.

A key to success is including the potentially affected interests in the early planning process, providing opportunities to educate and communicate important facts about a project. Creating a public process program is an important factor in public projects. Involving potentially affected interests early-on can help improve the chances for overall success and can reduce the opportunity for conflict.

The ultimate goal of the public process is informed consent: an informed public that consents to the project. Informed consent is generally obtained by a public agency on a project when an informed public is convinced of four issues:

- The project addresses a serious problem
- The agency addressing the problem is the legitimate one to do so
- The project process is fair
- The agency genuinely does care

To help accomplish these objectives, a project team should develop a public process plan, which in short, uses a variety of techniques, carefully selected and applied, to accomplish specific objectives for effective communication. These techniques should be carefully managed public participation and community relation efforts.

As part of EBDG's design project, our public process plan techniques included:

- Working meetings to confirm that project objectives were aligned with the extra benefit of increased communication between various players
- Key stakeholder meetings to inform about a project and uncover issues that may have impact so the team could respond appropriately
- Regional public meetings to engage the public in the process and allow for technical input
- A project website to provide a way for less involved or unknown interests to learn about a project; a successful website will include updates throughout the project
- Project surveys to provide a means of finding potentially affected interests and/or issues that may impact the project

Have you ever wondered what happens with survey results? Following up with those that complete a survey can help gain acceptance through the public process. On the AnyDOT project, those that completed a survey were added to an email distribution list so the project team could communicate when additional project details became available. Proactive communication rather than reactive communication may become your key to success. For AnyDOT, the combination of a project website, project survey, and email distribution list served as effective communication tools for use with the general public.

This wraps up the general overview of the Public Process. For our project, the initial survey results showed concerns about potential job loss. The project team responded by adding the union representatives to the key stakeholders meeting list and an email explaining the project to the crew. Our client continues to use knowledge from the survey to improve its communications and show it is concerned about project impacts on its employees.

There are many benefits that we would like to share. A managed Public Process campaign develops a disciplined approach to identify and deal with potential opposition. It opens

multiple channels for gathering valuable public input. It grows public and political support for the project and the agency. It reduces naysayers by giving opposition members a means to remain opposed, while providing consent for the project to proceed. And it provides the agency and consultant a means for receiving and acting on good technical input from unexpected sources.

Tough economic conditions demand that public money be spent wisely. A managed public process is essential to gaining public agreement that a public project is necessary. It establishes or confirms the legitimacy of the agency, the project and the approach to the project. It potentially reduces overall efforts due to reactive public engagement efforts and will likely provide more effective results.

You can learn more about SDIC at <http://www.ipmp.com/> or contact EBDG!