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Community consultation: lessons from Sydney

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This paper describes the mechanisms and potential benefits and pitfalls for community consultation on major infrastructure projects, based on the author's 20 years of experience as a community liaison group facilitator in Sydney, Australia. It reports in particular on lessons learned from consultations on two major projects: the Epping to Chatswood railway and the Cross City Tunnel. Despite being run along similar lines, consultations on the former were widely considered a success by all parties whereas the latter degenerated into open hostility, with negative long-term consequences for the project and its promoters.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Australia, the government minister for planning is the consent authority in major infrastructure projects, overriding local councils' normal powers (Fig. 1). The government cites the need to focus on economic benefits to the state as a whole, making it necessary to bypass councils' often slow and unwieldy decision-making processes and to manage the 'Nimby' (not in my back yard) phenomenon.

Once a successful tenderer has received ministerial approval to begin construction, the minister imposes conditions of consent, the most usual of which is that community liaison groups (CLGs) be established to facilitate dialogue between the government, the construction consortium and citizens affected by the project. The notion of regular liaison between members of the local community and the contractor is attractive in principle, yet meetings often begin in a climate of hostility and distrust after protracted protest at the local level.

For transport projects, consent requires liaison with the local community at key points along the construction route. Whereas some people may be concerned with the appearance above ground of a noise wall after completion of the project, others may be more affected by the noise of tunnelling during the construction phase. In theory, establishing groups on a geographic basis allows such diverse needs to be addressed, and liaison groups can be formed and disbanded over the life of the project as required.

If it can be made to work, consultation is a worthwhile exercise, often resulting in better outcomes than those on the drawing board, and can also identify and resolve problems as or before they occur. Many of the projects are design and construct, so

there is scope to make changes along the way as a result of unforeseen conditions (e.g. in the subsoil), or issues raised by local communities.

2. COMMUNITY LIAISON GROUPS

Before construction begins, the construction consortium has the task of finding and sometimes interviewing potential members of a CLG, who should represent a range of stakeholders, from local residents to business owners and operators.

The role of an effective CLG, with its members drawn from as wide a range of stakeholders as possible, is to represent the community as a whole, regardless of their own motivation in joining. They must attend meetings and act as conduits for information about the project to the local community as well as to their natural constituencies.

It is of critical importance that members who join a CLG after its inception enter via the same process as the original members. Latecomers can be regarded with suspicion within the group, whatever stance they take, because nothing distorts group cohesion as much as perceptions of special treatment or access for a chosen few.

Informal channels are often the key to successful information provision in a given area, and can be extraordinarily effective in reaching people who would ignore a leaflet or a press release, but listen intently to one of their own, telling them about the latest developments and proposals. CLG members are left in no doubt, however, that they have no power to alter the project as approved. The minister's conditions of consent stipulate this as a fundamental concept whenever CLGs are to be formed.

CLGs are led by experienced facilitators, whose role is to run meetings and act as the point of contact between locals and contractors, engineers and government representatives, and anyone else concerned with the project. It is left to the construction company to decide whether each group will have a separate facilitator, or whether the same person will chair a number of groups. Even where two or three facilitators are involved over the life of a project, they work quite independently of each other, and have no easy way of exchanging information.

Sometimes facilitators are given the additional role of 'independent community liaison representative' (ICLR), making



Fig. 1. Sydney, Australia—the government minister for planning is the consent authority in major infrastructure projects, overriding local councils' normal powers

them responsible for the management and mediation of any complaints which arise in the course of construction. The ICLR role can be given to a second person who attends meetings and monitors and mediates complaints. Both the facilitator and the ICLR are paid by the construction consortium, but are expected to be completely independent.

3. PURPOSES OF CONSULTATION

Australians traditionally expect consultation in most areas of public life, and resistance to new initiatives often hinges on failure to consult adequately. However, as the government have retreated from traditional infrastructure activities such as housing, road and railway construction, and gone into partnership with private industry, information once available in newspapers or under freedom-of-information legislation is increasingly deemed 'commercial-in-confidence' and withheld from public scrutiny. Being part of the consultation process thus enables communities to find out what is going on.

People affected by new development are frequently opposed to it simply because they like the status quo, and lack the kind of broad overview of a situation which may suit them but disadvantages others. Participation in rigorous consultation, where they must assimilate new information and hear others' views, encourages attitudinal change, and moves people from 'me' to 'we' thinking.

As participants experience the delicate balance that needs to be struck between competing interests and demands, they come to understand the way multiple viewpoints must be synthesised in the problem-solving process. At the very least, even where they do not agree with certain decisions, they are able to explain to others like them why such decisions had to be made, how difficult the negotiations were, and will sometimes even defend decisions they initially found unappealing.

At its best, consultation can be much more than window-dressing. It is a genuine attempt to inform, exchange ideas,

identify and resolve problems. For example, while disturbance to local flora and fauna forms a key element of environmental impact statements, consultation with local environmental groups often results in significant amendment to construction schedules—such as to enable protected species of frogs to spawn or plants to germinate.

4. PROVISION OF INFORMATION

A common condition of the minister's consent is that the consortium receives a 'tick' or 'sign-off' from CLG members, stating that they have received all the basic information about construction and its impact in the form of construction method statements. To achieve

this, the consortium needs to provide large blocks of information to CLGs at an early stage, just when members are preparing for what they assume will be discussion and negotiation.

Facilitators must manage members' expectations and assist them to be patient. CLGs should be forewarned that, in the early stages, the process may appear one-sided, and to remind them that the goal of providing such information is to set the scene for real dialogue about the construction process as it unfolds. It is difficult to discuss issues that are not fully understood: if this stage is skipped, as it sometimes is to avoid the frustration it generates, a CLG's later deliberations are severely compromised.

Project engineers, while not necessarily the best communicators, are invariably the most believable project representatives, being closest to the real process of construction. They need to provide CLG members with information that is accessible to them and give handouts at the conclusion of each presentation. They should present visuals whenever possible—including maps, diagrams and plans—but all adapted so as to be easily understood and discussed on the spot by lay members. Unless there is discussion, providers of information have no way of knowing how their audience is interpreting facts and figures, nor whether they understand what is being put to them.

The purpose of making information available to community representatives is to give them a thorough grasp of basic concepts. Where this succeeds, members of a group can later be instrumental in resolving a misunderstanding or a dispute within the group by being able to challenge one another's erroneous beliefs and assertions. Groups are far more likely to take note of another member's views than those of an outside expert, brought in for the express purpose of 'changing their minds'.

Experts need to think through the basics of their professional expertise, and be prepared to satisfy the following requirements.

- (a) Define all technical terms (if they plan to use them at all—and this is often avoidable).
- (b) Clarify basic concepts in lay terms by the use of analogy (e.g. how many decibels does it take to wake people from a deep sleep; how many decibels is the sound of a garbage can lid clattering to the ground or a truck travelling x metres past a window).
- (c) Give an overview of their role and the scope of their involvement.
- (d) Encourage participation by allowing questions throughout their presentations.
- (e) Ideally jettison a presentation altogether and provide the information it contains in answer to questions from the group; research into adult learning identifies this as the best structure for optimum retention of information.

5. CASE STUDY: EPPING TO CHATSWOOD RAILWAY

The £780 million, 13 km long Epping to Chatswood underground railway line (formerly known as the Parramatta Rail Link) is due to open at the end of 2008. The route passes through suburbs on Sydney's north shore, where property is expensive and the local community is active. The author was appointed as a facilitator of two CLGs.

Project engineers and presenters invariably used a Powerpoint, photography-based presentation to 'educate' CLG members, cutting down the time required for laborious explanation of what was to be done and where, and maximising discussion time at meetings. In a short time, a relationship of trust had grown between the constructors and the community, and engineers had quickly become skilled not only at presenting basic concepts, but also at reading the mood of different groups.

Although presenting the same bank of information to the various CLGs, they soon became experts at recognising the issues which were likely to cause anger, and at demonstrating how these issues had been handled elsewhere in the construction 'geography' to the satisfaction of those affected. In this way, the project engineers began to manage not just the construction project and information about it, but also the parties to the process—the stakeholder members of the various CLGs. Cooperation of this kind is invaluable when things go wrong, as inevitably happens.

The construction consortium behaved in an exemplary manner throughout the project, providing information in a timely way and resolving disputes as they arose. In fact, satisfaction levels with that process were so high that when a major failure to consult became known, the CLGs were prepared to see it as an oversight, and a single special meeting speedily resolved the issue.

One of the issues resolved by the consultation process related to trees. To ensure access to the rail corridor in case of an accident, engineers proposed removing a number of established trees close to the line. The trees were on railway land, but had provided visual and acoustic screening for numerous properties along the line. Some residents were vehemently opposed to any tree removal, but others were delighted as their gardens had long been overshadowed by trees they had no right to cut.

On learning of the concerns regarding trees, the author approached the consortium with the idea of walking down the track with local residents and project engineers so they could discuss the three inter-related issues of

- (a) removing trees
- (b) managing noise
- (c) access to the railway line by emergency vehicles.

The consortium built on the idea by inviting the members of two other CLGs to join the walk. After a pleasant afternoon's stroll in a place usually out of bounds to the general public, the matter was settled at a single meeting where decisions were made and later adhered to.

In another phase of the consultations, local residents met on site with project engineers and explained how the area behaves in heavy rain, and how noise travels up from roads and homes in the valley below. This knowledge was passed on to experts, who validated it in studies they might otherwise have not undertaken, to the satisfaction of all parties.

Plans to rehabilitate an area of bushland were altered to ensure only particular species of native eucalypt would be replanted, necessitating collection of seeds and arrangements to have saplings ready by the time planting was to begin. Locals participated actively in this process, generating much goodwill—all the more remarkable considering that the Lane Cover River National Park, a Sydney icon, was to be disturbed by tunnelling and by construction of a cofferdam in the river.

6. CASE STUDY: CROSS CITY TUNNEL

The £330 million, 2.1 km Cross City Tunnel was completed under Sydney's central business district in 2004. The author was appointed as one of the CLG facilitators early in the consultation process.

On being awarded the contract to build and operate the tunnel in 2002, the Cross City Motorways consortium arranged a letterbox drop and articles in community newspapers around sites where construction was to begin, inviting people to join a CLG. The consortium then held briefing sessions for new CLG members about the nature of their involvement in the project. They were told they would receive information about the construction of the project and its future operation, and would be given the opportunity to comment and give feedback as construction proceeded.

At the time there was widespread community distrust of new road tunnels following two similar projects in Sydney: the 1.7 km long Eastern Distributor completed in 2000 and the 3.8 km long M5 East opened in 2001. Both projects had disrupted traffic for years, damaged property and were the cause of many complaints of ill-health due to lack of filtration systems. To avoid a repeat of these issues, the author advised the consortium to provide information clearly and carefully, and to show its commitment to open and transparent communication and negotiation with stakeholders and the general public.

Unfortunately, with one or two notable exceptions, the majority of the project presentations in the critical early phase were poor. For example, the first meeting involved outdated

overhead-projector technology, with transparencies simply photocopied from engineering manuals that were as unhelpful as they were illegible. CLG members were at first puzzled, and then embarrassed by their own inability to grasp what was being put to them. By the second meeting, the presenters' inability to explain or answer questions in simple terms had started to anger CLG members.

Despite requests to arrange presentation skills training for the engineers, most continued to present in the same ways and became more defensive in meetings, which consequently became increasingly tense and rapidly degenerated into exchanges of set-piece hostility.

The responses from the consortium appeared haphazard and evasive from the beginning. Items identified for discussion at a future meeting failed to appear on that meeting's agenda; agendas were changed just before meetings; and sometimes new items appeared without explanation, often requiring lengthy presentations that took up large amounts of time that should have been given over to discussion. The minutes of the meetings rarely captured the tone of discussions.

On a number of key occasions, the issue of traffic flows around the motorway caused particular consternation, and met with a very limited response from the consortium's representatives. From the outset it had been apparent that roads and traffic flow would be the major concern at CLG meetings yet it was never adequately addressed.

As a result of the increasing ineffectiveness of the consultation process, the author and another CLG facilitator resigned after several months.

There were some successes, however. In one instance, when residents of high-rise apartments in the city were informed about a programme of night-time working, they recommended that work should proceed throughout the night in order to shorten the period of night-time work, preferring a known number of complete nights of disruption rather than disruption of half of every night for a longer period. In return, they asked for access to a 24 h hotline number in case noise levels were exceeded, and the engineers leading the construction team readily agreed. A complaints process was set up, and complaints were handled efficiently and courteously; appropriate action reassured complainants that they were being taken seriously.

Night-time road-works in the inner city are always problematic in Sydney and the city council rarely gives permission for work to go on all through the night. In its planning, the construction consortium had therefore not anticipated residents' support for all-night working, and had planned for a far longer period in the city centre. Only consultation revealed that they were at one about getting it 'over and done with' in the shortest possible time. This in turn meant that many of the disruptions to construction that arise from having to stop and start and prepare city roads for peak hour traffic were avoided, and engineers estimated that many weeks' construction time was saved. This and similar small-scale successes contributed to the tunnel's completion in advance of the anticipated date.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Given that the design for the consultation process on the Parramatta Rail Link project followed essentially the same lines as the Cross City Tunnel, it is instructive to speculate about the reasons the consortium for the latter felt it did not have to respond openly and positively to community concerns. Both projects were extremely sensitive, and in some ways, the rail link more so as its route extended through and under a national park.

As subsequent events have indicated, the key appears to be how much the project team had to hide, and the extent to which this created a climate of secrecy—all of which was reflected in the maddening opacity of the consultation process.

The government of New South Wales has paid dearly in political and financial terms for the Cross City Tunnel project. Negative publicity has dogged the motorway since its opening in August 2005. The high cost of the toll, undisclosed contract conditions including road closures to force traffic into the tunnel, and misleading signage directing traffic only to the tunnel on certain routes have all caused outrage. Drivers have retaliated by shunning the tunnel and fuming over congestion on the city roads they now insist on using.

An inquiry led by former chief justice Sir Laurence Street revealed the extent of the road closures and funnelling the government had secretly negotiated as part of the public-private partnership. Street's report¹ testifies eloquently to the reasons for the silence that surrounded road and traffic issues during the consultation phase.

In September 2005, an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Act of bastardry on a toll road to nowhere',² described the widespread atmosphere of mistrust and disbelief following revelations that a government could so betray its mandate.

In damage control, the government announced the immediate reversal of some closures contrary to the contract. In an effort to win back users, the consortium followed suit, announcing it would cut the toll to half, that some closures would not be pursued and others reversed voluntarily. After announcing it would not take action for compensation allowable under the contract, however, the consortium subsequently rescinded that promise and began investigating possible legal action.

In December 2006, the tunnel collapsed in debt and was placed in receivership. Opposition roads spokesman Andrew Stoner was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as saying³

The sorry history of the Cross City Tunnel and the Labour Government's complicity in its failure has given public-private partnerships a bad name the world over.

The paper went on to report as follows⁴

It soon emerged from the release of documents relating to the deal that the Government had... traded away the public interest. It had agreed on road closures from which it could only withdraw by paying almost as much in compensation as it cost to build the tunnel.

The fallout spread far beyond the fury of motorists. The Government's credibility took a blow and the tunnel became a symbol of its incompetence.

The project clearly illustrates to governments and developers how vital it is to bring people along with them as they build a future for a city and its citizens. Genuine consultation makes communities feel the public interest matters, and that they are partners—albeit not always equal partners—in a process, however unattractive the project. Information withheld will loom larger in retrospect and be more damaging to the withholder than if it had been made available at an earlier point, with time made available for discussion and explanation.

In the words of Peter Sandman, an American expert on crisis communication,⁵

The experts respond to hazard; the public responds to outrage. When hazard is high and outrage is low, the experts are concerned and the public will be apathetic. When hazard is low and outrage is high, the public will be concerned and the experts will be apathetic.

Outrage makes people hostile, attentive and sceptical. The fundamental error in the Cross City Tunnel consultations was to treat citizens as apathetic and credulous.

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