

Working Constructively with Concerned Citizens



As an industry, can we do a better job of fostering acceptance of our proposed projects?

BY JAMES A. KENT

Opposition to nearly every type of energy expansion is growing at exponential rates. From oil and gas drilling to hydraulic fracturing, citizens and communities everywhere are saying no.

Today, there are literally hundreds of wind and pipeline opposition groups in the United States alone. If the current pace and expansion of these groups keeps up, there will be little room for energy development at any time anywhere. This epidemic of opposition has far-reaching consequences both in the short and long term. While a company's reputation and bottom line is clearly at stake, the impacted community senses an imminent

threat to their ecological, economic and social well-being. These issues are further compounded when the government, faced with project opposition during the permitting process, has to weigh both sides and finds it difficult to make a conscientious decision.

GETTING TO YES

When projects are introduced to communities without warning or input from the local citizens, a strong reaction often follows. People will band together with anyone else who feels marginalized by the process, and before long, opposition materializes and a battle ensues.

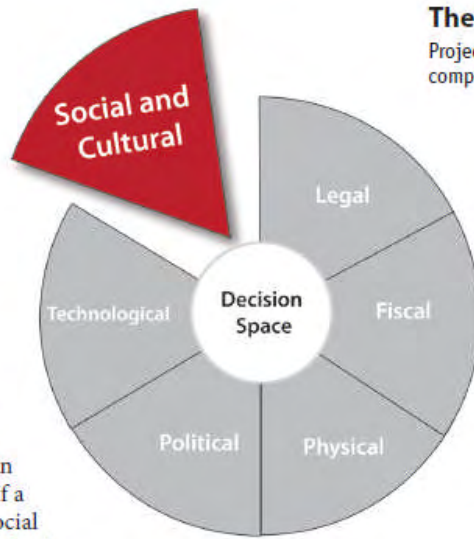
For the most part, companies fail to recognize that landowners are part of a larger geographic community with a unique social structure. The typical negotiations process is approached in a singular fashion, where each landowner is contacted individually to discuss purchasing or leasing the rights of way. Unfortunately, it is this singular approach that has spurred the exponential growth of project opposition. Each one of these formally organized groups started as an individual or small group who opposed a site-specific project. Why? Because the project's proponents did not fully understand and embrace the social and cultural elements at play.

Whether we choose to admit it or not, project proponents are often creating their own hurdles on the ground, where the projects need to be accepted, approved, permitted and built. An alternative approach has worked wonders in generating project acceptance. If a project team understands the social and cultural traditions and beliefs of a community, collaborates with the members of a community, considers and respects their concerns and the impact a new project will have on their sense of well-being, opposition is reduced, and the chances of project success increase.

CO-OP STRATEGY WORKS

In rural America, for example, the concept of a cooperative system has been around for centuries. Farmers have cooperated on buying seeds, harvesting, selling products, breeding cattle and other common activities. Co-ops are a cultural phenomenon and can be used effectively when negotiating sites or rights of way.

In central Wyoming, when land acquisition agents for a wind company approached individual ranchers to negotiate land for wind turbine locations, the ranchers had a better idea. They requested an organized co-op to ensure that their cultural respect for common equity would be honored. The ranchers negotiated on behalf of everyone so that, regardless of where the turbines were located, all of the ranchers shared equally in the financial benefits. Rather than risk the outcome where one rancher might benefit while 14 opposed the project, in this instance, there were 15 ranchers who unanimously embraced the project.



WHERE TO BEGIN

Looking at what's involved in the decision space is a good place to start. Decision space is typically comprised of six interrelated elements: technological, legal, fiscal, physical, political and social/cultural. The dynamic interaction of the six elements defines the space available for executives to make decisions. Pressure on any one of the six elements constrains the decision space. Often, only five of the elements are considered when project teams are first assembled.

What is often missing at this critical juncture is the social/cultural component. More specifically, establishing the prevailing traditions and beliefs is crucial, as well as identifying which changes the project can resolve, knowing what issues are legitimate and which ones the citizens will initially fight. This neglected area is what causes a serious gap within a company's development strategy, and this oversight has led to the growing opposition movement we face today.

From my vantage point, it's essential that, as an industry, we proactively address the social and cultural perspective so we can prevent unnecessary threats to a community's sense of well-being, thereby reducing the breadth, depth, and intensity of opposition from forming every time a new project is announced.

The Decision-Making Components

Project opposition can be diffused if the social/cultural component is addressed early on in the process.

Project team members will have to learn new skills and expand on their old strategies. Specialists in community dynamics, social and cultural interaction, citizen issue resolution, and others who are skilled in citizen-based approaches should be included when project teams are formed.

Equally important, proactive leadership strategies should be developed for the right of way industry so that we can ensure that a consistent system rooted in mutual respect, trust and benefit is in place for collaborating with citizens of every community that will be impacted by our projects. If we hope to change this unfortunate trajectory of oppositional growth, it is our responsibility to develop professional standards that recognize the legitimacy of not just citizen issues, but also designing projects to ensure positive community benefit and growth.

Opposition forms because individuals within communities feel the need to protect themselves, their families and their neighbors from intrusions into their environment. However, when local citizens and landowners are engaged in meaningful ways that respect their concerns and protect the dignity of their traditions, beliefs and ways of life, then the odds of attaining project acceptance increase significantly.

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