

Perception of the Local Language

BY JAMES A. KENT

How important is it to understand the local language? Most of us underestimate the power of local talk, especially when planning and designing site development and corridor projects.

Taking note of how the locals talk about their community can be invaluable because language reflects the culture and framework in which people view, manage and act on issues in their environment. Take a moment to listen to people at the grocery store, coffee shop and other gathering places. Hearing this talk in a natural setting lets you hear it unfiltered by formal influences.

Despite the importance of understanding the local community language, most companies often miss this opportunity. This oversight typically results in suspicion and hostility to the proposed project from the community whose support is needed in securing approval. The negative reactions that follow most likely have nothing to do with the project itself, but simply with the language used to explain it.

Case Study

A good example comes from the Copper Dam hydro-electric project on the Skagit River, which was proposed by Seattle City Light. My company was hired to conduct the Social Impact Assessment for the Environmental Impact Statement.

Soon after arriving in the Skagit River community, we heard stories about a place called the “Tar Heel Crescent.” The Crescent turned out to be a unique bend in the river, which had been settled over the years by loggers and miners who came from North Carolina.

Challenge

The engineers described the proposed project Copper Dam as an “earth-filled dam” in all of their formal presentations. However, the

local residents were not hearing that description. Instead, their ears heard “mud dam.” As our team listened to the locals discuss the project, several references were made to a new “mud dam” being proposed for the river. We immediately suspected trouble.

To understand what the term mud dam really meant, several stories were obtained from the Tar Heel residents. They described it as sludge from the coal mines that was pushed up to form retaining dams for holding back highly-toxic runoff water from the coal tailings. These are considered dangerous by the miners because they can break very easily. Since the Tar Heel Crescent was downstream from the proposed earth-filled Copper Dam, this was a concern.

Resolution

It was important to hear for ourselves why the local residents had translated the earth-filled dam’s language into their own cultural understanding. To them, earth meant mud. They were strongly opposed to this 40-foot high dam given their past experience with the small dams associated with mining coal. The size of the dam was not the issue. It was how the dam was perceived.

At the same time, we learned that several bald eagle advocacy groups outside the immediate area were opposing the Copper Dam. They began reinforcing the mud dam language as a fear tactic in hopes of engaging the local Tar Heels in opposing the dam. By resolving this misunderstanding, which took about a month, we were able to neutralize the leverage held by the advocacy groups over the mud dam issue at the public hearings. This helped the client to avoid costly conflict, needless project delays and possible defeat. By the time the formal hearings were held, there was no opposition from the Tar Heel Crescent communities.

Lessons Learned

Knowing first-hand how local people talk about their issues, how they process information, and the names they use to refer to historic and cultural areas are critical to gaining insight. This also leads to early community participation in the newly-planned infrastructure project. By engaging people informally and integrating the local language before making long-term decisions, holding public meetings and crafting formal announcements, citizens are more likely to become involved and help build internal support.

The fact is, NIMBY-ism grows out of misunderstanding and fear of loss—two areas that project managers can influence. If decisions are made that build from the “bottom up” approach, and language is used that allows citizens to understand and participate in, rather than react to the process, they will be more receptive and supportive to changes in their environment.



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