

EXAMINING THE ROADBLOCKS

Barriers on the road to project health

BY LESLEY T. CUSICK



Kevin Preister of The JKA Group recently spoke to the participants of the online Social Ecology Resource Group community and posed the following questions:

To my colleagues in the right of way industry, here is something I'd like to know. What do you think are some of the roadblocks to having right of way companies have greater resources to engage community members about how a proposed project will affect them? You guys are the closest of anyone to communities of impact. You are good at what you do—that is, you know about the importance of getting trust, of treating people fairly and of good listening. What are the roadblocks? More and more, projects are facing delays or loss because of citizen resistance, and if opposition groups are getting so common, where is the investment on the part of your client companies and project managers? I have worked on many projects in which citizens had useful ideas for improving project design and implementation. What's it going to take for project managers to begin asking, "Who lives near this proposed project site and what are they thinking? We better get out there and find out!" We believe there is a payoff for learning community first. Why don't they?

These questions drew my attention. Unlike many other forums that one can belong to, this one was asking something—not telling something. This was entirely unique, refreshing and also challenging. The following are some of my reflections on roadblocks. With diligent effort, I believe we can avoid or find detours around them.

Background

My response to Kevin's challenging questions is prefaced by pointing out that I am not a right of way professional. Instead, my career has been spent primarily on federal projects that bring about change to the human environment (e.g. the natural and physical environment, as well as the people and communities that

live there). I'm also associated with Leaders in Energy and Preservation (LEAP), a non-profit organization. LEAP's vision is for energy developers and cultural resource preservation advocates to work together to protect and document our nation's invaluable cultural resources, while harnessing the national security and economic advantages of domestic energy production. Both arenas involve planning, development and impact assessment.

Some of the roadblocks we encounter in project development are predictable and are therefore avoidable. At least, these roadblocks can be minimized. Their origins are due to a variety of factors that include understanding how people—individually and in community—are affected by and manage change. The broadest ways to categorize these project development roadblocks are by “perspective” and “process.”

Roadblocks of Perspective

These roadblocks consider the view of the project from the developer's perspective. For example, a developer may think the project makes sense and “if people just understood that, they would agree it is good for them.” This approach is difficult to deal with because it is demeaning and can set up a conflict with the community because you are doing something “to” and not “with” individuals in the community. This position corners the community members in that some don't want to understand, and while others do, they are often intimidated by those who monopolize discussions. The outspoken individuals may say to the developers that they speak for or on behalf of those who are intimidated, but they really do not. Others simply need some one-on-one time with project people to ask questions, consider responses, get comfortable and then they *might* express issues, fears and concerns. This one-on-one creates a great opportunity to engage with the community members in order to understand them—just as Jim Kent and

Kevin Preister advocated in IRWA's Social Ecology Course 225. Our function is to be listening and engaging long enough to distinguish issues (actionable and dynamic) from agenda (positional and static) items. This is the place and the time where the issues will be identified for the project to seek to resolve. Issues left unaddressed fuel the agendas that grab the headlines and then positions form. Once positions form, the project is in jeopardy.

Positions are referred to as "themes" or "agendas" that come from the public. These positions are often well-financed by parties who have nothing to lose in promoting their take down of a project. There is notoriety to be had from aggressively taking on a project and winning its cancellation or postponement. The result is a juggernaut of emotion and the stifling of conversation. That agenda action is extraordinarily destructive as it affects people who need the infrastructure, energy, jobs, small businesses, etc. Even worse, these groups often claim to represent their interests. The community's concerns and those who need the service or infrastructure are often overlooked and take a back seat to the agenda.

A future article will discuss the other more basic reasons that community engagement is avoided, namely fear of failure, fear of criticism, fear of trying something new or worse yet, fear of being successful when trying something new.

As professionals who are part of this Social Ecology process, we know that there are successful examples of engagement, but successes don't make the news. We need to work on that.

Another roadblock of perspective is the inability to see the larger picture, which is an unfortunate result of specialization. We can't just look at what we do within our specialized area of expertise and presume that if it clears our hurdles, then it's okay for everyone else. Those of us who interface with the public have to encourage project management to look at what their entire project will do. You may be negotiating with one person for a small right of way, but it goes without saying that that portion is part of a larger whole that the project will affect. Different specialists can look at soil for a particular reason, but until we look at the soil as the place where the new road will be—the road that will bring changes to a community and its environment—only then will we see the larger picture.

Roadblocks of Process

These roadblocks regard the steps we take to execute our work. Process is often experienced as "the way we've always done it" and is a classic regulatory checklist-or flowchart approach. It's predictable on what the outcomes will be and fails with more and more frequency. Regulated projects can end up in court and because the process has been followed, there can be a favorable outcome for the developer. However, those victories can create casualties: distrust, animosity, reputational damage, acts of destruction and project loss. It is difficult for us to see our internal processes because we are in them. However, taking an outsider's view, they may see the entire process ("the way we have always done it") as the problem. If we have not taken the time to listen to members of the affected community, there is a chance that they will see *us* as the problem.

Persisting in order to demonstrate to shareholders that a company is doing its part to develop a project is an approach that has become old and burdensome. The efforts and the challenges that play out in the media are business expenses, but corporate reputations suffer and projects continue to not get built. There can be winners

and losers in this approach that eventually show the true colors of both sides of a conflict. It's unclear, however, how many potential supporters or opponents on either side retain interest long enough to see how things play out: reputational damage done.

Corporate Risk Management Roulette

For those who say they don't have the time or budget in their project to engage with the community, it's important to at least speak up and ask for it. Develop project metrics to show associated positive or negative variances regarding engagement. You can invest time and money initially, help manage expectations by addressing fears and generating alternatives, gain valuable insights that benefit your project and potentially build relationships within communities. Or you can be the target of protests, lawsuits and related delays and then try to recover. That recovery will ultimately need to involve the people who were initially overlooked—if they will even talk to you at that point.

Inaction is not without its consequences. We see increased traffic accidents on over-capacity roads, brown-outs, flooding, decreases in air quality and increased utility rates—often with disproportionate adverse effects to minority and/or low-income communities. Through thoughtful and responsible planning that includes community engagement and listening, companies will be in a better position to deliver successful projects. A company's goodwill is earned once a project begins to consider the issues of a community and seeks to resolve those issues. ★



Lesley T. Cusick has been in IRWA since 2013. She is the Program Director for Community Outreach and Engagement with RSI EnTech, LLC, an ASRC Industrial Services Company. Lesley has over 30 years of professional experience assisting public and private sector clients with project development.