



INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Using the social ecology process in adjusting to new project reality



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TC Energy (previously TransCanada Corporation) announced in June 2021 that its Keystone XL Pipeline (KXL) project was formally canceled in response to a recent U.S. Presidential Executive Order that revoked a crucial permit. This column addresses the precarious environment for projects that this cancellation exemplifies. That environment requires project owners to develop an understanding of how communities and citizens have evolved to become more engaged in projects and to become more successful in that engagement. How key decisionmakers choose to approach this budding challenge will affect the success of future projects.

The Context

When Right of Way Magazine's first Social Ecology column on the Keystone XL pipeline project was published nine years ago, Alex Pourbix, TransCanada President of Energy and Oil Pipelines said:

"TransCanada did not realize that the project would become such a heated political and environmental issue in Nebraska. If the company had had any clue, we would have undertaken more efforts to communicate with the public."



Over the years, the company continued following the traditional approach to community outreach that did not appear to reflect the severity of the growing threats to the project. *(Note: it is not publicly known what options were considered by TC Energy during this period of time.)*

Using social ecology methods, at least one option to consider would have been to parallel or expand the existing Keystone Pipeline. The route of the existing Keystone Pipeline follows the 100th meridian and it had little to no opposition when it was built. The key reason for that? It was built on the human/physical geographic boundary that separates the eastern U.S. from the western U.S. where the Prairie meets the Great Plains. A geographic boundary is an area of “least interest” to people because it is on the edge of the area’s culture. It’s possible that TC Energy wasn’t aware that the proposed KXL route bisected an area of great cultural value to Native Americans. The route also went over the Ogallala Aquifer, which is not only a water supply for millions, but is also essential to Nebraska farmers who have been on the land since the late 1800s.

The loss of KXL represents a watershed moment for the energy industry. Traditional methods of project development no longer function well today. It is imperative for companies to not only engage the community from the start using effective social ecology understanding, but to also acknowledge the immense power a community can wield for or against a project. If a community is buttressed in their opposition by a targeted, social media campaign, the results can be much more harmful and long-lasting to developers. This type of opposition can be mitigated by implementing a project using social ecology methods, which can completely starve third party opposition groups of a community’s negative energy that they so badly need to continue their attacks against projects.

Time for Adjustment

It is clear that the old top-down model for planning and building projects to meet the current and future needs of communities is not working. A study of infrastructure projects, conducted by the Global Energy Institute of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (USCC), showed a cumulative loss of \$57.9 billion during the period from January 2010 to August 2018 by 15 of the projects studied. This staggering amount lost on the projects in the USCC report was primarily the result of disruptive citizen issues that were not successfully recognized or addressed during project planning or implementation.

Neither the losses reported in the USCC report nor the KXL project losses are unique or random events, but rather are evidence of a growing trend of citizen resistance to such projects. While project owners may sometimes be tempted to file lawsuits or wait for a social or political change, available evidence suggests that this strategy no longer works. These actions are costly and do not address the root cause of the major trend underlying the increasing number of failed projects — citizens’ increasing desire to have more control concerning what happens in their environments.



What is required is a new “bottom-up” model based on an understanding of community decision-making systems. This shift to a new management process sets the stage for social ecology as an effective resource for project owners desiring to have successful projects for the communities they impact and serve. The new model that is emerging focuses on intentionally working with communities, not passively or simply informing them of what will be done.

For example, Holy Cross Energy (HCE), a membership electrical cooperative located in Colorado, was involved in a 10-year standoff with a resort community regarding a new substation and transmission line. The infrastructure was needed to ensure reliability in their distribution system. HCE knew that using the power of the Public Utility Commission, which they had access to, or use of eminent domain, would do irreparable damage to HCE and the relationships they had nurtured with their co-op members over the years. They decided to use a social ecology approach to address the negative environment that had developed. In 18 months, the substation project was moved from the decade-long standoff to resolution by creating citizen understanding and participation in solving what essentially was a serious citizen problem, preventing long-term blackouts in the whole system during the peak tourist seasons. To this day, HCE has maintained excellent relations with the community and other entities in the geographic area with whom they must interact on various projects.

Working With, Not Against

Working with communities on their own terms, in their own settings and on mutually beneficial timelines may seem challenging, but this approach is effective when initiated during the conceptual planning portion of the project's life cycle. Typically, two structural obstacles exist that prevent companies from earning citizen trust and gaining community commitment towards a project's success.

The first and most significant structural obstacle is that companies do not see the impacted communities as organic entities with their own unique physical, social, economic, and geographic-based environments. Rather, the communities are at times, seen as added risk elements of the corporate project development process that the project manager may need to overcome. When companies fail to recognize and engage the community as part of the process, this presents increased risk to the project as well as to corporate reputation and the company's shareholders. Worse, it can lead to a project's failure. Communities are not merely the receptacle of the routine corporate outreach program but are legitimate power entities themselves and should be considered as such.

The second structural challenge presents itself when projects encounter citizen resistance. There is not enough "reflective learning," even as projects continue to run into complications involving the communities. Instead, project owners often try to fix the matter by doing what has been done in the past — increase the budget to do more of what has always been done. Attorneys are engaged, and the win/lose battle mentality ensues. If this does not pan out, they are forced to cede and leave potentially billions of dollars behind. However, this process can be resolved through understanding and applying social ecology methods from the start — learn how citizens communicate, what issues are current in the community, who they value for advice and counsel, and specific details of how the project will affect them.



Success Also Happens

There have indeed been successful major infrastructure projects built using social ecology methods. Each of the projects below has at least one important thing in common — the social ecology planning component was linked directly to management leaders. When a community issue of significance was identified, the appropriate people were quickly engaged for real-time action as an equal player on the team, not staff borrowed from a public relations or corporate communications department. Project managers had the flexibility and independent standing to actually resolve issues as they occurred.

What follows are examples of projects that successfully employed social ecology methods:

- Successful land annexation to complete the Denver International Airport was obtained by bringing the governor of Colorado into key local gathering places (in this case, cafés and flea markets) to talk directly with citizens to dispel rumors and to advocate for project benefits. This personalized attention to the community and its concerns made the difference in a crucial vote on a ballot issue between a successful new airport project and outright failure of the project. The story on the success of this five-billion-dollar project was published in the January/February 2019 edition of Right of Way Magazine under the title of: "The Oatmeal Circuit."
- The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management previously suffered from political gridlock due to increased public scrutiny of land management practices at the national level. Using the principles and methods of social ecology, staff capacity was expanded, and policies were put in place to encourage community-based collaborative management. Project development times were reduced by 75%, essentially going from long-term, persistent gridlock to a more beneficial issue-solving action mode, by greatly improving community engagement and citizen satisfaction.





- Hawaii Electric International was able to completely restructure its newly acquired Guam Tanguisson Power Plant incorporating the learning of its indigenous staff to save the power plant from shutting down. It still runs today, with employees bringing their operational style of using informal networks into the mainstream management of the plant.

Constant Learning

Many (if not most) project managers who experience challenges from impacted communities quickly become aware that there may be something missing from their program of citizen engagement. Without proper education of social ecology methods, the project may suffer, and proponents may never understand what went wrong.

The problem for project owners is that those who seem to be making the best use of community engagement are those who block projects at nearly every turn these days — the opposition groups. These groups have trained thousands of protest participants in ways to stop or delay infrastructure projects. For example, there is an anti-pipeline curriculum that is being proposed from the earliest grades as part of the climate justice movement. A simple online search of “Climate Justice anti-pipeline” or “anti-fossil fuels” training will turn up dozens of opportunities that teach participants how to organize to fight development. These groups have built a sophisticated system that feeds on any conflict, anywhere, that a project creates. Training programs in how to carry out opposition are developed and implemented from three-day sessions to extended intensive courses. The programs are constantly updated by well-designed feeder systems which report new material from the protest sites to the core team for immediate use and incorporation into future actions. One instance of this can be found in an article published by Greenpeace, which reported several communities gathering to be trained in strategy and tactics to stop or delay pipeline projects through a program called, “No Pipelines Training Camp.”

These groups’ coordinated, ongoing activities result in great expense and loss to the project owners and ultimately, to the communities that would benefit from the infrastructure. The antidote is to foster a “moderate middle” — instead of creating a radical fringe — by successfully resolving legitimate citizen issues in real time with the people who will be impacted. When project owners do not recognize a community’s issues, this can often feed the energy and budget of opposition groups. However, once citizen issues are successfully recognized and addressed at the local level, the ability of opposition groups to leverage the discontent is diminished.

What is needed now is a widespread, meaningful reflection on timely and diligent citizen engagement by corporations during their projects’ critical phases. An omission of this type not only hurts the projects themselves, but it also has harmful effects

industrywide. While implementing social ecology principles may not solve all complications in a project, it can certainly lessen headaches in the long run and help prevent potential failure.

The power shift taking place presents an unusual moment to begin facing the necessity of a changed corporate process. The lessons learned from KXL, Dakota Access Pipe Line (DAPL) and other projects provide us with a crisis which has created an opportune time to change our direction and approach to citizen and community engagement. ☘

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