

Leveraging the Science of Community

BY JAMES A. KENT

Embracing the community

- Streamlines approval process
- Lowers project costs
- Prevents disruptive issues
- Citizens become collaborators
- Good results follow



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Reaching community buy-in on a newly planned infrastructure project is no longer a luxury proposition. Through experience, trial and error, we have discovered a new way of doing business in communities -- ways that are often more effective and less costly than most current practices. We call our approach social ecology, the science of community. By using informal networks and taking steps to identify, listen to and involve the community on the front end of a project, we get good results.

Informal networks work because they prevent disruptive issues from dominating the community decision making process. Frankly, if the issues of informal networks and their implications are not well understood in a project development approval process, the company and its project team may be sitting ducks when they walk into a formal meeting where "group-think" prevails. The real issues in a community that can make or break the project are often missed entirely. In a formal approach, as many as 90 percent of the people being affected are often not engaged and do not show up at the public meetings and hearings.

CASE STUDY

Many new alternative energy projects, such as solar and wind, are facing site specific and transmission corridor issues. One example of a misplaced corridor selection, which many of these projects may ultimately face, is the American Electric Power's (AEP) 765kV transmission line. It was originally designed to run from near Blue Field, West Virginia to Jackson Ferry, Virginia - a distance of about 150 miles.

Challenge

A section of the power line crossed 11 miles of the George Washington and Thomas Jefferson National Forest, which meant that a federal Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was required. AEP picked the most direct route across the forest, as companies often do, and that route ran on top of Peters Mountain in West Virginia, as well as through several Scotch-Irish

settlements that had been there since the late 18th century.

While the company had spent six years and \$5 million preparing the technical side of the EIS, there was no testing for citizen issues at the beginning of the project. No attention was paid to the social impact requirements contained in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, which governs the U.S. Forest Service approval process. By neglecting the social issues, the company had no real understanding of the cultural challenges surrounding Peters Mountain or the people who would ultimately decide the fate of their power line.

Resolution

In this instance, the topic of "cultural attachment" surfaced late in the EIS process, and our company was called in to bring an understanding of what that issue meant for the project. We spent three months in over 30 small settlements listening to the people of Peters Mountain, understanding their survival strategies and what was meant by cultural attachment. The informal networks of Peters Mountain were formidable in their desire to remain in their ancestral homes, on their own land and continue their generational self-sufficiency. Because of the cultural attachment issue associated with the corridor, the request was denied by the Forest Service. Had AEP been oriented to the community and social aspects of corridor development, they would have learned at the beginning of the process, six years earlier, that Peters Mountain was a poor choice. Eventually, we were able to work with AEP and the Forest Service to find a suitable alternative corridor that did not impact cultural attachment in its routing. As a result, the EIS was approved in 1999, a full nine years after the project first began.

When these horizontal systems are understood and engaged, opportunity is created for new projects to optimize social, economic and ecological benefits in a local area. Citizens will become your partners and collaborators once you address their issues of survival and attachment to place.