Managing NIMBY Issues Before They Manage You

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Those who are responsible for siting and permitting site-specific or linear facilities are well aware that in today's environment of regulatory requirements, polarized politics, and litigation, citizen opposition to proposed projects can be daunting. Determined citizens have successful track records of delaying projects, driving up project costs, and blocking projects that are technically sound and necessary. To relegate the causes of citizen opposition to a few selfish people who do not want the project in their backyards is to miss the crux of grassroots citizen activism.

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As the former director of facilities siting for a wholly owned subsidiary of AMCO Oil Company, my responsibilities were to site all of the company's hazardous waste storage,

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transfer, and treatment facilities in North America with the acceptance of local citizens and their communities. Community acceptance was crucial to the successful permitting of the proposed controversial facilities that were regulated under the auspices of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976. Many of the community-acceptance lessons learned in siting those facilities, ranging from $15 million to $100 million, are directly applicable to controversy generated by natural gas and electricity projects.

DECISION SPACE

All project managers and corporate and regulatory agency executives are well aware of the decision space associated with developing regulated projects and the parameters that affect the options for decisions. The project decision space is constrained by at least six dynamic parameters: legal, fiscal, technological, physical, political, and social/cultural.

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The parameters of the decision space are in a state of dynamic flux. As one parameter expands or contracts, the other parameters are directly affected. For example, if citizen opposition to a proposed project intensifies significantly, constricting the social and cultural parameter, the political parameter begins to contract as the support of elected officials evaporates in the hot

winds of controversy. As a result, legal and fiscal parameters are negatively impacted. Eventually, through regulation, legislation, or litigation, the technological and physical parameters may collapse, reducing the decision space to costly, untenable options.

COMMUNITY ISSUES AND PROJECT COSTS

There is a direct correlation between the intensity of community issues and the financial, human, and reputation costs associated with proposed natural gas and electricity projects. Community issues do not begin their lives as uncontrollable events that will stop projects. Instead, community issues begin as legitimate questions that citizens have regarding proposed projects. At this stage of an emerging issue, opinions are rarely formed; rather, people are seeking answers to questions like the following:

- What will this project do to my property values?
- Will the project increase traffic?
- Will the project diminish air and water quality?
- How many people will be required to build and operate the project and how many of them will be hired locally?
- Will the project enhance the development of local businesses?
- Will the company proposing the project develop community-based training programs to prepare our citizens for employment and advancement?

If the questions are not answered in a timely fashion with credible information through believable sources, community issues will likely move into the existing issue stage. This is the stage where opinions are being formed. Community dialogue changes from seeking information to positions being stated, such as the following:

- This project will ruin our property values.
- The traffic and noise from this project will be unbearable.
- Children and seniors with asthma will suffer, and the incidence of cancer will increase.

- They will not be contracting or hiring locally.
- Local businesses will not benefit from this project and may actually lose revenue.
- The skills necessary for employment are beyond most of our citizens.
- The company just wants to exploit our community for their profits.

If the community issues remain unresolved, the community opposition is often joined by opportunistic outside ideological groups, polarizing the project. When polarization occurs, the proposed project will move into the disruptive issue stage. At this point, the project proponent has virtually lost the ability to respond satisfactorily to and resolve the individual and community issues. Instead, the decision process will fall under the authority of regulatory, judicial, and/or legislative entities.

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As community issues increase in intensity from emerging through existing to disruptive, the range of options for issue resolution diminishes. Unfortunately, the least costly options are the first casualties, and the ones that remain to the end are the ones so expensive that they may be impossible to implement.

MANAGING COMMUNITY ISSUES

Managing community issues that have the potential to delay or block proposed projects falls into two categories: issues prevention and issues intervention. Both require that project managers have crucial social and cultural knowledge about the citizens and communities likely to be impacted by the proposed project.

Issues Prevention

It has been my experience that many issues associated with proposed projects can be prevented and need not occur. All

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communities are different because they have unique histories, are geographically defined, and are populated by diverse individuals. Therefore, each community has a unique set of social and cultural dynamics that are different, requiring that each community be addressed in a custom designed fashion.

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By taking up-front time to understand the social and cultural dynamics of communities and the issues within those communities, project managers can design projects that are sensitive to the traditions, beliefs, and culture of the geographic area of impact. Projects designed with social and cultural knowledge will be more congruent with the deep values of communities and their unique traits. This will help to avoid the creation of fears in citizens by recognizing the issues that exist in the community and new issues that the project will likely create.

Issues Intervention

When legitimate citizen issues arise or if outside groups insert ideological threats into the siting and permitting process, project managers can effectively intervene in those issues by asserting wisdom based on social and cultural knowledge. Issues in their emerging and existing stages can be effectively addressed through the following:

- Early detection
- Knowing and addressing the root causes, not the rhetoric
- Working with those carrying the issue to identify solutions
- Formulating responses in the language of the community
- Verifying response actions with the issue owners prior to implementation

Project managers that are in alignment with the community's beliefs and traditions and how they influence community reaction to outside forces can be better equipped to respond with effective issue-resolution actions. Those actions will be focused on the root causes and grounded in the values and language of the community.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL/CULTURAL PARAMETER—SOCIAL ECOLOGY

How do project managers trained in the technologies of natural gas or electricity begin to understand the social/cultural parameter of the project decision space? The first step is the realization that by their nature, traditional community relations, public information, and governmental affairs approaches are employed too late in the process. Those traditional public disciplines overly rely on formal processes like public meetings, printed materials, and media releases that reach only a small fraction of a community and are often not considered to be sources of credible information. Therefore, they do not provide project managers with relevant knowledge of a community, nor do they provide community access that will assist in maintaining a viable social/cultural parameter in the project decision space.

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It is necessary to understand that communities are living organisms made up of component parts. Understanding how the components work together to shape and influence the entire community is called social ecology. There are several social and cultural components of a community that company employees can be trained to observe and integrate into the decision process.

- *Settlement Patterns*: Why do people live here? Why do they stay? Why do they leave?
- *Work Routines*: What do people do to enable them to stay? What would have to happen to make them leave?

- *Community Caretaking*: How do people take care of each other, helping each other survive?
- *Leisure Time Activities*: In what pursuits do people spend their nonworking time?
- *Community Issues*: How do people link themselves together? What are the concerns and issues prevalent within the various informal social networks? How do people organize to address their concerns and issues?
- *Informal Communication Networks*: How does credible information flow within the community? How are opinions formed within the community? Where do people gather? Who influences whom?
- *Community Boundaries*: What are the natural or human-built features that people use to designate and define their community? How do people relate to their natural environment? What are the ways people define "home"?

Employees can be trained to methodically observe, record, and proactively act upon their observations and findings. In order to understand the social ecology of information gathered in each of the components, it is necessary to begin identifying the patterns of similarities, overlaps, and influences that each component has on the others. Understanding the ecology of the community can only be done by working with members of the community through the process. Understanding cannot be achieved in isolation.

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The objective of the social ecology of a community regarding the proposed project is to develop a thorough understanding of how a community informally defines its sense of well-being prior to projects being proposed in formal regulatory processes.

COMMUNITY SENSE OF WELL-BEING

Every individual, as well as every community, possesses a self-defined sense of well-being—knowing when they are comfortable and at ease and when they are not. Fear and anger, which are usually the causes of community issues, arise when there are perceived threats to the sense of well-being. There are at least three things on which communities base their sense of well-being: security, choice, and predictability.

- *Security*—Is the proposed project safe? Will the proposed project ask the community to accept risks that are beyond their self-defined limits? Will the proposed project cause divisions in the wholeness and integrity of the community?
- *Choice*—How much control will the community have in the key decisions regarding the proposed project? Are there important differences in evaluations of risk and benefit between the project proponents and the community? Will the proposed project enhance or hinder the community's achievement of its vision for the future?
- *Predictability*—Will the proposed project insert unknowns into the life of the community beyond its ability to cope? Is the proposed project compatible with the community's perceived path to the future? Will the proposed project enhance the shared understanding of community sustainability?

Every community will define its sense of well-being differently based on the community's social ecology. For example, one community may have a high tolerance for risk based on the community's history and traditions. Another community may have a low threshold for risk based on that community's past failures concerning previously proposed ventures.

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When emerging and existing issues are detected, it is crucial to know which individuals and informal social networks are carrying those issues. Then by working directly with those individuals and informal

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social networks, the root causes of their issues can be identified. Often, the process of identifying the root causes of the issues is similar to peeling skin off of an onion, because the issue owners may have difficulty articulating the perceived threat to their sense of well-being.

A knowledge of the social ecology of the community coupled with gentleness and patience will go a long way to identifying the root causes of the issues and thereby identifying the actions for satisfactory resolution.

EFFECTIVELY UTILIZING SOCIAL ECOLOGY IN PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Just as there are methods, processes, and science associated with the legal, fiscal, technological, physical, and political parameters of the project decision space, so it is with the social/cultural parameter. The knowledge gained by project managers regarding the social ecology of communities likely to be impacted by proposed projects can be used in the following project stages:

Project Proposal

- Definition of purpose and need as it relates to the impacted communities
- Community-sensitive project design
- Project consistency with community values, vision, and plans

Project Actions

- Identification of community issues
- Development of alternatives to address issues
- Assessment of social and economic impacts
- Public information content, language, and methodologies
- Meaningful and collaborative citizen engagement
- Effective grounded response to issues

Project Implementation

- Acceptable monitoring protocols and procedures
- Acceptable evaluation of project milestones

Social ecology is a learned skill that can become a valuable discipline used by project managers responsible for managing interdisciplinary teams of professionals. There are two important keys to making social ecology work effectively: (1) it must be used at the very beginning of projects and (2) it must have parity with the other disciplines in tactical and strategic project decision making.

CONCLUSION

Project managers and regulators are well aware of the effects of community issues on project schedules, costs, and eventual success or failure. Traditional public relations efforts employed by project proponents and citizen participation requirements of regulatory agencies are often interpreted by communities as what the proponent is planning to "do *to* us." There is a better way. Social ecology includes the impacted communities into the project so that citizens interpret proposed actions as what the proponent is trying to "do *with* us" to improve our quality of life.

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This approach takes more time on the front end of projects. Nevertheless, the trade-off is that the approach reduces the time and cost of responding to community-driven disruptive issues that need not have occurred in the first place. And it reduces the costly ineffectiveness of responding to the rhetoric of issues rather than positively addressing the root causes of issues.

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Social ecology, if employed correctly, assists in maintaining a viable and open social/cultural parameter in the project decision space. ⟳