



OLD IDEAS ABOUT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Don't get caught operating under their influence

BY LESLEY CUSICK

An infrastructure project that entails repairs, improvements and enhancements (such as a road widening or the addition of exits) can have you treading on “old ground.” However, this revisit may be entirely new to some impacted community residents and businesses, and they will want to know more than you anticipated. Contact and engagement is called for and it should also involve the people on the waysides who are often forgotten yet always impacted in some way.

Life Adjacent to the Fast Lane

Infrastructure projects bring challenges, opportunities and promises to both the project sponsors and the communities. The promises of improved access to highways or enhanced reliability in energy supplies can bring good press, good jobs and good news for the communities that will benefit. Infrastructure projects create opportunities for project-related jobs in the construction and construction-related service industries; can enhance community revenues from lodging, restaurants and fuel sales; and bring economic development, new housing and other amenities. Additionally, people tend to like things “new and improved.” However, these are often not the circumstances for wayside communities. Despite being along the way of a project route, these wayside communities are not direct beneficiaries of the project.

As highlighted in numerous Social Ecology articles in this publication (in particular Citizen's Awakening, March/April 2019, and Beyond the Permitting, November/December 2016) people are not only *seeking* to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives, they are *expecting* to have a responsible part in those decisions. At a time when so much seems outside of their control, the ability for individuals to control even a small fraction of their environment is something that is likely to be very closely guarded. When so much is changing around us, don't we seek the stability of our routines?

We've Been Here Before

In the case of road widening projects or new infrastructure along existing rights of way, it is likely that those in the right of way industry *have* been there before. Realize, however, that the adjacent property owners may have changed over time and that new businesses and residents are present so this will be new to them. In areas of urban/suburban expansion (such as the cities of Raleigh and Charlotte, NC and Phoenix, AZ), entirely new towns may have sprung up since the last time an infrastructure project took place. New residents to an area are likely to expect to have a voice in change; after all, they have just made an investment to be there. No doubt some part of the decision to move to their new community was based on the quality of life and its “quiet enjoyment.” Similarly, economic conditions may have been less favorable in other wayside communities and the disruption of new construction may be “just one more thing” to bear. The cumulative effects of change are at work and need your comprehension.

While the biggest hurdles were overcome for the initial installation of the infrastructure, project sponsors should strongly consider some “over and above” engagement along the rights of way of the new project. This can build relationships with community members, facilitate understanding of the project and its anticipated impacts, and create goodwill. Public notices in the newspaper or on a roadside sign of an upcoming project can be enough for some people familiar with a project, but they can lack the context that newcomers and others need—especially in underserved communities. If the initial project’s expectations (say for relief of traffic congestion, economic growth or more reliable power) have not been met and the effects of that gap between project expectations and project delivery has been long-lasting or accelerating, the need

for enhanced engagement is clear. Communities along the right of way can be assets and are worth the investment of your firm and your client’s time. Remember that new paradigm: it’s all about the social license to operate (SLO).

A Social License Refresher

Recall that the term “social license” has many descriptive terms but no precise definition. Some common descriptions include having *ongoing* approval within the local community and other stakeholders for an action, as well as society’s moral and political approval sufficiently widespread and stable to allow legal approvals to proceed and to assure ongoing community support. According to “Social license to operate: Legitimacy by another name?” by Joel Gehman, Lianne M. Lefsrud and Stewart Fast, social license is a form of social acceptance or approval that the company or project has a legitimate place in the community. Whether individually or together, these descriptions suggest that the inherent need of a community to, at minimum, understand a project is an organic function of community self-preservation. Understanding the impacted communities is uniquely valuable at this time and is precisely the reason to do community contact and engagement *all along* the existing right of way of your project. Further, the concept that a SLO has to be maintained is an additional consideration for the project sponsor when planning the project.

It is important to note that a social license is unidirectional – it is given by the community to the project and the community owns it. For example, while you may have an existing project that is due for widening or enhancement and you know your territory, you may not know the people in your territory. You may not know their *need, expectation or demand* for involvement. A social license is not a regulatory requirement, but without

some level of the components of the social license ladder (recognizing the project as legitimate, enabling acceptance, approval and potentially support) you can plan on challenges.

How Project Impacts are Experienced: Endpoints and Waysides

As detailed in “The Three Pitfalls of Social License” by Youri Chassin and Germain Belzile, the compensatory/mitigation benefits of infrastructure projects are concentrated at the endpoints. This is illustrated in Figure 1 (from Cusick and Hoffman), showing an example project. The endpoint communities may obtain sound barriers, improved access, construction jobs and direct benefits to the community such as money for local roads or contributions to emergency response facilities. However, along the route of the project, there are few direct benefits for the wayside communities. Rather, they obtain road closures, noise, dust, increased traffic and road damage along the alternate routes. Pressure to finish can be applied by the endpoint communities, driven by concerns over economic impacts, whereas delays accrue to the waysides.

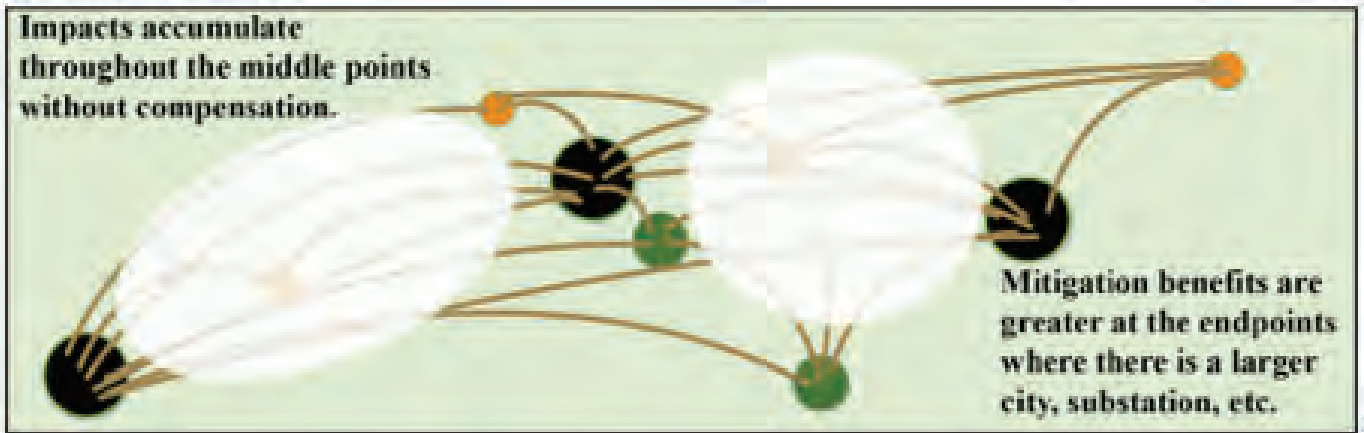
Figure 1



Regional Examples of Impacts and Benefits (I-69 Corridor in Indiana)



Figure 2



Middle Points Bear Repeated Impacts of Infrastructure Projects

Figure 2 (from Cusick and Hoffman) illustrates the point on a more regional or national scale. Smaller cities and towns and unincorporated areas between the endpoints of infrastructure projects can be *repeatedly* impacted. Existing infrastructure rights of way are the paths of least resistance for new linear infrastructure and related features. A present-day example would be a new natural gas development project with pipelines, well-pads, processing facilities and storage facilities. Generally-supported initiatives still have specific impacts, and specific impacts can result in emotional responses. SLO challenges may be forthcoming. Project sponsors need to consider that “Flyover Country” is both populated and impacted.

Recommendations for a Smoother Ride

Reach out to the communities with fresh messaging and news, and consider doing an overview of the project history using aerial and other photographs and various media methods. Rather than just presenting what is planned, review what was and what is. “Then and Now” themes are engaging and can be effective, informative, build rapport and relationships, especially among the wayside communities. Create community connections; they are to your project’s benefit and can make you a reliable source of information.

Be particularly mindful of wearing out your welcome among the wayside communities. You may have forgotten the months or years of inconvenience, dust and noise they may have experienced, but many among the citizenry will

have not. In the past, the members of these communities or hamlets in rural areas may have been uninvolved in project meetings (if they were available at the time) or resigned acceptors of change. A wise project manager needs to understand that tacit project acceptance is like a landmark fading in the rearview mirror. You can’t just look back at it; it will not be the same as when you faced it. The combination of community engagement that doesn’t address the community’s issues and social media that exceeds them (most often by people outside of the communities) can make any small town the center of the universe.

Although the U.S. is increasingly urban, the number of Americans living in small cities is still far greater than the number of people living in large urban centers. Smaller cities are attractive for their more manageable scale, the slower pace and the ability to meet every day needs largely without crowds, traffic and noise; that sense of belonging to a self-sufficient community is valued. Small towns are often fierce opponents of projects if their life routines are threatened without their consent and participation. Communities like these are the ones along the waysides of project rights of way, where local speeds of 25 or 35 mph through town intersect physically, visually, financially and emotionally with the 65 mph projects you bring. Merge carefully. 🚗

A portion of this article was excerpted from “Community Engagement – A Citizen-Centric Approach to Seeking a Social License, by Lesley T. Cusick and W. Dean Hoffman, figures by Heidi Hoffmann, copyright WM Symposia 2020.



Lesley 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.