

The Pipeline Project in Remote NSW

A public participation case study involving a small community under threat of having its water supply pipeline replaced with water tanks - written by Max Hardy.

The Issue:

A rural water supply authority had a problem. A major pipeline, supplying a very small village of about 40 households, was believed to be in need of replacement. Initially built to service an oil refinery (that has since closed down), the replacement cost of the pipeline was in the vicinity of \$4 million.

Given the number of households relying on the water supply the water supply authority had no chance of doing this upgrade in a commercially viable way (which they are required to do). The authority was attracted by the idea of providing water tanks for free and disconnecting the pipeline...but how would the community greet this news? Would it accept the proposal? And if it didn't what could they do?

Who was involved?

The key stakeholders were the Government Department (funding and regulatory body), the water supply authority, local Council, permanent residents, and residents who used their properties as weekenders.

What happened?

Residents, including part-time residents, were informed about the situation through a newsletter, a 24 hour toll-free line, and through advertorials. Interviews were also conducted with senior staff of Council and with residents who were active in the local residents association.

It was most evident that the locals were not at all happy with the prospect of losing their supply of water. A local spokesperson helped to arrange for meetings to be held in the local hall, interspersed with comments leading us to believe that we could be lynched!

To contain numbers to an acceptable level we invited people to register at one of three meetings.

To our surprise many insisted on attending all three meetings. Despite the modest town population a total of 85 people had booked into the sessions - about three times the permanent population. With advice from the local progress association, sessions were planned for Friday at 1pm and 7pm, and the following day at 10am. The intention was to enable those who were part-time residents (most of whom lived in Sydney) to attend, as well as permanent residents.

The first session was predictably hostile - very hostile. One resident set up a microphone and tape recorder, such was the lack of trust. The authorities were challenged about the maintenance regimes on the pipeline, the mismanagement of the water supply, and the delay in telling people about findings of the pipeline condition. Residents strongly expressed the adverse impact on their lives if the water supply was disconnected.

In between the meetings representatives of the various authorities waited inside and around the hall - the nearest shop was over an hour's drive away. There were interesting developments. Gradually they informally established dialogue with some members of the public. Local people vented some more but felt they were being heard. Government representatives were learning more about the people who would be affected. It was becoming increasingly difficult for either 'party' to stereotype, or 'demonise', the other.

Not surprisingly the second meeting was marginally easier - a little more listening and learning. The third meeting was better still.

A Community Working Group, including ten residents, part-time and full-time, formed to continue the dialogue with government and council representatives. Conflicting reports about the pipeline led to a decision to 'walk the pipeline route' to inspect and understand more about its condition. The 'walk' led to some surprising discoveries. Although some sections were in poor condition, it was not as extensive as authorities had been led to believe. The act of walking together strengthened relationships and helped to build trust. People increasingly became curious to learn, as opposed to merely seeking to find things that supported their position on the matter.

A breakthrough - community members and authorities concluded that water loss was not so much due to pipeline condition as it was about some residents tapping into the pipeline - using water to illegally irrigate their properties.

Constructive plans commenced to address the problem sections.

The Outcome

After further studies authorities decided to sleeve (i.e. insert a poly pipe through the old concrete pipe) in several sections. A member of the community actually made this suggestion at one of the meetings. The cost was about \$250,000 instead of the \$4 million to replace the whole pipeline. The community was informed of the finding concerning illegal use of the pipeline. It was difficult to police so the onus was placed on the community to 'do the right thing' or else the supply may have to be disconnected in the future. Community Working Group representatives agreed to educate the community about this and to keep watch!

The problem was resolved!

Learnings

- Informal communication works wonders. Dialogue is much more likely to be achieved during informal sessions and opportunities than around a formal table or highly structured meeting. Allowing generous amounts of time for refreshments enables multiple conversations to take place.
- People need to vent. If they are unhappy they need an opportunity to express their feelings. Until they do it is unlikely that they will be able to absorb new information.
- A series of sessions can help a conversation to unfold. Although it was originally planned to run similar sessions in parallel, the level of interest was such that many people participated in all three sessions. This gave these people an opportunity to work through their feelings, have their concerns heard, and to move forward.
- Walking with people creates a positive dynamic. The walk of the pipeline helped change the nature of relationships. There is something about moving together that allows to people to relate quite differently. Walking in the same direction builds rapport.
- Accurate information can help avoid many problems. A shared understanding of the nature of the problem is essential before issues and solutions can be properly explored.
- Facing angry people may never be enjoyable, however, we underestimate the potential of people spending enough time together to understand the aspirations and fears of all parties, and to work collectively.

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