Communicating Across the Table

A Municipal Perspective on Engagement

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My Experience

• 1999 lawsuit against Longhorn Pipeline reversal in Austin, Texas
• Crossing highly sensitive environment – Sole source aquifer, endangered species
• Five year battle
  • No communication
  • Poor communication
  • Good communication
• Decades of experience working with communities on controversial environmental issues
Communication Between “Adversaries”

Three sides

1. Pipeline owners and operators
2. The public – Property owners, safety advocates, local government, neighborhoods
3. Regulators – Federal and state agencies

Each has their own roles, interests, motivations, and needs
Effective Communication

Honesty

• The most important factor. Without it there is no trust.
• Does not mean share everything
• Does mean don’t mislead, hide, obfuscate, or lie
  • Don’t hide behind “proprietary”, “too technical”, “entitled”, “not required”
  • Be proactive in sharing information that you know will be wanted and in asking questions (no ambushes)
• Be clear about what you can and can’t share and why
Effective Communication

Respect

• Each side’s perspectives and motivation
• Most people aren’t “horrible” or “evil”, they have different needs, perspectives, motivations, and priorities
• Questioning positions or facts isn’t disrespectful if it’s done respectfully
• Respect intelligence – An engineering or advanced degree isn’t required to understand pipeline technical issues or regulations
• Be willing to agree to disagree
Effective Communication

Acknowledgement

• Acknowledge and accept there are facts and perspectives that may be counter to your position, but are real and legitimate

• Example - Pipeline accidents and risk
  • They do have a very low probability of occurrence
  • They can have very high consequences

Acknowledge that both factors are true
Effective Communication

Longhorn outcome

• Fundamental disagreement between us (plaintiffs) and Longhorn/PHMSA
  • Shutdown time and consequences (risk)

• We lost, but we got:
  • Unprecedented protections in areas threatening aquifer
    • 19 miles of new pipe
    • Lined trench w/ concrete cap
    • Leak detection cable in trench
    • Spill containment outside trench
  • Good communication between Longhorn and City of Austin that continues today
Good communication occurs when there is a level of trust and understanding between the parties instead of hiding the ball or grandstanding.

TRUST BUT VERIFY