



CONsultation vs Consultation

The misunderstandings and importance of genuinely consulting communities

BY TOM EVERITT



It's becoming increasingly common these days — an infrastructure project in a community is announced and subsequently delivered, and an angered part of the community declares they weren't consulted on said project.

At face value, a major infrastructure project not consulting its surrounding community sounds concerning, but is there merit to these claims? What is consultation, and what do projects and communities understand to be consultation? Let's begin with the definition. An excellent point of reference is taken from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) participation spectrum (also referenced in the last issue of Right of Way Magazine).

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

| | INFORM | CONSULT | INVOLVE | COLLABORATE | EMPOWER |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|---|--|
| PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL | To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions. | To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions. | To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. | To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution. | To place final decision making in the hands of the public. |
| PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC | We will keep you informed. | We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. | We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. | We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible. | We will implement what you decide. |

© IAP2 International Federation 2018. All rights reserved. 20181112_v1

Source: International Association for Public Participation www.iap2.org



We see consult as “obtaining public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.” This goal also includes a promise to keep the public informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

It is interesting to note that “consult” is only one step above “inform,” which infers a one-way communication.

Why is consultation important?

From major construction projects to sidewalk landscaping works, as a default position, residents and stakeholders that reside near said projects, that are both impacted by, and obtain benefit from these projects, should naturally expect to have a say in developing such parts of them. They’ll be living with the outcome of this project as soon as it is complete. If you hear about a park being built over the road from your home, would you not like the opportunity to suggest what is contained in the park? And if your suggestion had not been included in the final design, you might expect to understand why it was not. If a council constructed a park in a suburban area and only worked with (or “consulted”) a large corporate architecture firm to design this or say, only with a primary school two blocks over, at face value, it doesn’t make sense, and an argument would be made that more genuine consultation should have occurred.

Identifying the Parameters

Consider a recent infrastructure project where you might’ve heard such claims of lack of consultation. Recalling the above definition, in many cases the organization has actually met their requirement to consult — being that the project has proactively provided community forums and/or other platforms for stakeholders to provide their input, and then later advised them how such feedback informed the final product (and if it didn’t, why it didn’t). Yet, sometimes in these cases, we hear that a portion of the community takes an often-prominent position stating that the adopted solution is bad, and they weren’t consulted. In such situations, genuine consultation has occurred. Feedback doesn’t *have* to inform the design, but if the scope was there to potentially allow for different outcomes or solutions and was put to the community (with appropriate consideration given to the feedback and communicated accordingly), that would be, by definition, genuine consultation.

There are major infrastructure projects here in Victoria, Australia, which actually publish their consultation reports on their websites, identifying and documenting the methods they used to communicate the project, how they collected feedback, key themes and what the outcomes from the key themes were and how they integrate into the project. In such events, these



projects can proudly say they've consulted their community on these specific parameters. The community and stakeholders can actually check how they've consulted. However, consultation reports sometimes fall shy of stating why some parameters were not consulted on; in such instances, we would see that projects would be within their rights to say they've *informed* on such matters but consulted on others. Project negotiables, such as allowing the community to have input on colour schemes, artwork and other items within the design, is a practical demonstration of community consultation.

A great example of genuine consultation taking effect is a grade-separation project in Melbourne's inner southwest. Initially, an option to remove the Ferguson Street level crossing in Williamstown was proposed via a "rail over road" design and was put to community consultation. Strong opposition to this option entailed from surrounding residents and the community at large, which would eventually neighbor this design. As such, the project heard this feedback and returned with a final design being rail under road. It was eventually constructed after even further community consultation on more granular parts of the design. While a broader debate of benefits and functionality from a "rail-under" instead of a "rail-over" grade separation remains, the solution adopted here being an outcome from genuine consultation is really good to see.

Project Constraints Can Downgrade the Level of Consultation

Where an exception might occur however, is where an upcoming project does not allow for any variables. For example, a grade-separation project that occurs in a confined, underground, service-ridden corridor in an industrial area where installing the rail line underground is only the viable option. Other than informing the local businesses on transport network disruption times during construction, we see there is no genuine "consultation" that can occur (consulting the commuters using the train or local businesses on what color the inside of the underground rail tunnel is painted would likely be seen as patronising). A project team gloating about "consulting" the surrounding area about this project now becomes a false claim. Remember, to consult implies a two-way dialogue, listening to feedback and then advising the public how their feedback has (or has not) influenced the decision to the matter at hand.

Be Careful with the Use of the Word "Consultation"

A construction project is a fixed-window event which is constructed, and in almost all cases, left for the community to benefit from. The term *consultation* has become a buzz word to throw into dialogue to allay the communities' concerns that their feedback is important and influential. But we do see some projects where communities might be left wondering if what they were actually consulted upon — in the hope of influencing a key aspect — was utilized, yet nothing is provided. Some projects can make genuine consultation challenging, as factors such as budgets or technical constraints can leave a very prescribed scope of work.

We don't have to look hard to see many projects occurring around our communities and states — most of which should really involve aspects of consultation. But to avoid such community outcries on lack of consultation, and to *genuinely* consult their communities and stakeholders, the term consultation should not be used so casually, and reserved only where an organization can prove that actual consultation has occurred. If an assessment found that consultation has not occurred, or could not occur, projects owe more transparency to their communities on exactly what they'll consult on, what they'll inform on, and if no consultation opportunities available, proactively state why.

For communication and engagement professionals, it's worthwhile working closely with project leads at project inception stages to influence the design to allow for negotiable aspects, which can be taken to community consultation letting them have genuine buy-in to the infrastructure they'll be benefitting from for years to come. 📍



Tom Everitt has worked on some of Australia's largest infrastructure projects since 2009, which has seen him in various roles in the fields of land access, stakeholder engagement and project management. As the Director of TDC Services, Tom is currently contracted to oversee securing land tenure and project approvals for a gas pipeline in the country's southeast.