



ENTER THE BRIDGER

Participation partnerships can be “found” in translation

BY LESLEY CUSICK

It starts with a raised hand. A raised hand is universally understood; it's natural and intuitive. Children are experts at raising their hands. They want to participate; they have something to offer or need to have something explained because they don't understand. The ability to contribute to a discussion or a problem-solving effort is affirming for child and adult alike. It helps create a sense of belonging, aids with knowledge retention and memory and deepens understanding. These elements can be heightened when it's about something new. Children aren't the only ones seeking to understand something, they are just more inclined to act on that curiosity than adults.

Consider the word “new”; it is a marketing tool in a word — it piques your interest, can inspire imagination, engender a second look and maybe even a raised eyebrow. When the “new” involves a new right of way or new big project, the citizenry may look at present conditions and see them in a different way. The familiar has the potential to become dispensable or undesirable when compared to the new, or it can become a nonnegotiable in the face of a change that is opposed. Sometimes the opposition to change is not the change itself, as much as it is the origins of the change, its pace or how it was learned, or simply that it is not understood.

Required v. Desired

Various laws that may apply to your project have public participation requirements. Have you considered that participation *implies* understanding, but there is no guarantee it will be attained? These requirements can easily be reduced to a series of rote checklists, which, in turn,



reduces the public to an object. Furthermore, the term participation is a one-dimensional “check-the-box” toggle. What does it mean? A meeting or meetings? Emails? Social media posts? You can offer each of these avenues and meet the letter of participation but not the spirit. Engagement, on the other hand, implies a partnership that includes the understanding of what your project proposes. Witness projects have been canceled by the developers themselves as of late; they may have had every approval needed but lacked public support (see “Understanding Citizen’s New Empowerment” in Mar/Apr 2021).

A check-the-box project can find itself with all the boxes checked and still be met with opposition or protest. How does that happen? The origin of the challenges can originate with the *misunderstanding* that asking for participation is enough and *assuming* that what has been received is also enough and that it is

both reflective and representative of a community’s interests. There are far too many assumptions in that logic chain, and a key assumption is that the project has been understood. It may have been presented but not understood. This can lead to unpleasant surprises at a later time.

Engagement needs to be formed and shaped with the community via the development of a Community Engagement Plan (“Engagement Plan”) that is unique to the community and built with their input to be effective. Community Due Diligence efforts advocated by RSI in the IRWA course 225 Social Ecology-based OutSeek™ approach to engagement will result in a desire for engagement and participation. By first reaching out to a community to learn about how it “works” and what matters to it, you are building working relationships and identifying the people who can assist you. Your interest and respect for the community’s points of view will create interest in your project. You are opening a door to individuals and offering them an opportunity to influence an outcome.

Opening the Engagement Door

A project can be the “something new” that can spark genuine interest in each of us, and it should! It can be an “at last” moment for some — “At last, I can let people know what I think,” or “At last, I can ask some questions! My house is on the map you showed; do I have to move?” For many, it has been a long time since they have raised their hand with a question or have proposed an idea. Others may never have done so and may not feel comfortable speaking up, or they may be intimidated by the technology being used, the project being discussed or the others involved in the process — the list can go on.

Another significant factor that may be missing in efforts to gain community understanding is the fact that the project may be speaking in a different language. This is not a case of a document that needs to be translated from English to another language but from “project-speak” to comprehensible language. The good news is that there are ways to do this that can involve the communities and can strengthen engagement and partnership.

From the Complex to the Meaningful

Projects with almost any type of federal sector involvement or approval often create complex documents that can be hundreds or thousands of pages long. These documents can be laden with formulas, models, acronyms and jargon. Each of those aspects of a project can create barriers to engagement.

The Engagement Plan, to be developed with the input of the community, needs to incorporate information on how a community learns on a regular basis and identify the community individuals that help communities function. Those networks identify the true decision makers and approvers.





Remember that approvals are no longer limited to regulators and other authorities; some level of community approval is needed (e.g., a type of Social License). And yes, project documents that need approval must be comprehensible to the approvers.

The technical content of a document may need to “stand” to satisfy a requirement. However, the ability of the project sponsor to offer opportunities to increase understanding of the documents by the public *can* change. A pathway is needed to “translate” technical documents into meaningful and understandable segments by a layperson. As noted above, this is not a simple language translation, it is a content/purpose/need translation that recognizes how people learn. It can incorporate tools such as storyboards, generalized process maps or “take-home” booklets, in addition to whatever type of meetings can be held. Having periodically scheduled “office hours” can also help by creating avenues for engagement. Varying the hours or language skills of the project team broadens the resource. Having a website with anticipatory and frequently asked questions that arise are useful supplements to office hours.

A Bridge to and with the Community

An even more effective approach to increasing understanding and participation can be “community hours,” where a member or members of the community speak to their neighbors, friends and relatives about the project. How does that come about? It takes translation and recruitment. In implementing the Engagement Plan, the project team will start to see the community member(s) with the right skills for authenticating your project, bridging between the technical world and the community, teaching and caretaking the community’s interests. The key role here is the Bridger (see Jan/Feb 2020: Avoiding the Great Divide). This is the individual that can navigate between your project and the community. By identifying a Bridger, recruiting (hiring) them, working with them to help them become comfortable and conversant about the project, it will

enable them to translate it for the community. They know the people, the history, the landmarks of place and events and the culture that are the keys to developing understanding and increasing participation. This is a front-end effort that needs to be considered while the Engagement Plan is developed. You know you will need to gain community approval. It is an investment worth making in the beginning rather than trying to start over at the end while goodwill has been lost and trust eroded.

Translation Matters

The skills needed to write project documents and prepare supporting information are very different from the skills needed to understand project documents. This is the key advantage of a translator, the Bridger, from your project to the communities. If you aim to increase public participation, one small, but most significant way to do it is to start earlier, and to do so with the Bridger so they can incorporate local knowledge, enhance relevance and highlight the opportunity of participation. This is not a case of bringing project information “down” to the assumed level of understanding; instead, it is one of translating information to enhance knowledge and understanding.

Consider just a few things that a Bridger needs to know to assist a project:

- How is a document organized? Where can the background information be found, and where did it come from?
- What will the proposed change look like? How will it affect the community?
- What is the purpose and need for the project? How is that relevant to my community?
- What are the key words for understanding and are there relevant examples for the community?
- What is involved in routing or siting decisions?

By working with the Bridger, they will become conversant and knowledgeable and can bring it to the community for you and with you. You and your project team will learn from this effort along with the community. You will be able to observe effective and meaningful knowledge exchange. Complex decisions with long-term implications can benefit from creative ways to build trust and goodwill. Don’t let your project’s objectives get “lost in translation.” ✪

Lesley will be speaking on this topic as it relates to increasing public participation of the IRWA conference.



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