

How to Ensure Effective Community Engagement at Construction Projects: Lessons Learned from Two CARE Communities in Connecticut

The lessons described in this document are based on the collective experience of stakeholders working on or impacted by construction activities in two urban areas in Connecticut. We offer these reflections as a resource to others facing the challenge of ensuring effective community engagement on fast-moving projects, especially in neighborhoods where there are economically or otherwise disadvantaged populations with a history of perceiving that their needs have been ignored.



Construction projects are often located near urban residential neighborhoods because of the large concentration of aging infrastructure. However, the close proximity of these projects to people’s homes may result in major impacts. In addition, many urban dwellers, especially high risk residents such as children and the elderly are already burdened with a multitude of environmental and public health hazards, ranging from lead paint poisoning, to safety and exposure issues at vacant lots, to asthma made worst by poor air quality.

At the same time, construction projects must operate within the constraints of project specifications, demanding schedules, and limited budgets, and must comply with local, state and federal regulations. This mixture sometimes leads to quality of life and environmental health impacts, which may lead to resentment and conflict. Therefore, we hope these lessons will be considered by all parties early on in any construction project in order to ensure meaningful public involvement, to ease the burden on affected communities, and to minimize construction-related conflicts. A summary of the lessons learned outlined in this document is provided below.

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| <p>Pre-planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Plan and budget· Coordinate between design and construction· Know the key players and their roles· Identify community contacts <p>Public Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Strategize on when and where to hold public meetings· Develop meeting plans in consultation with a range of stakeholders· Coordinate meeting announcements to avoid unrealistic or polarizing expectations· Consider using neutral facilitators who can help turn a potentially explosive meeting into a productive session | <p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Establish methods of communication· Use a community liaison· Be accessible to the community· Communicate key information about project activities· Respond to key community concerns· Know when there are opportunities to participate· Develop effective outreach materials <p>Minimize Environmental and Public Health Impacts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Implement best practices or guidelines· Increase enforcement· Include emergency preparedness |
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BACKGROUND

I. Bridgeport

Bridgeport CARE, a program of the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ) funded by EPA, works with the city and dozens of private, government and non-profit partners to set priorities for reducing pollution and to devise ways to address it. CARE members expressed concerns about a high-priority public utility project that involved laying a new transmission line spanning a substantial geographic area. As a result of the project, the level of activity connected with a construction material (gravel) recycling facility in Bridgeport increased in duration and intensity, becoming an around-the-clock nuisance to the neighboring community. Due to the potential impact to traffic during the day, Conn DOT required that the work take place at night. The vibrations and noise associated with the night work were particularly intolerable to the residential community. When the level of frustration reached a boiling point, Bridgeport CARE decided to arrange meetings between residents and industry representatives to negotiate improvements for people living with problems of dust, fumes, noise, and the visual blight to the neighborhood.

Recognizing that it would be difficult to have a constructive dialogue with tension running so high, Bridgeport CARE reached out to EPA New England's Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Program. The ADR Program provided trained neutral facilitators to assist the stakeholders in the design and conduct of these meetings. To enhance their effectiveness, the EPA facilitators teamed with a respected community member in the facilitation of one of the more challenging meetings.

The meetings led to a host of short and long-term measures to be implemented by the stakeholders, often working in collaboration with each other. For example, one outcome was the creation of a committee of residents and public utility project staff to develop an alternative route through the neighborhood for construction trucks traveling to the construction material storage facility. Another especially effective short-term fix was Conn DOT's placement of an inspector at the site to enforce truck drivers' around-the-clock compliance with state regulations to reduce the noise and pollution impacts to the neighborhood. Other improvements included trucks reducing speed through neighborhood, compliance with maximum weight requirements, better signage, and enforcement of Connecticut's anti-idling law.

II. New Haven

As a result of the intervention in Bridgeport, EPA's Regional ADR Program was contacted by CCEJ to assist with an escalating situation in the City Point neighborhood of New Haven due to an I-95 highway widening project. Citizens in the City Point area had serious concerns about impacts to their neighborhood and houses from the fast-moving project. Emotions flared up when a row of

mature trees that had served as a noise and visual buffer between the neighborhood and the highway were removed without notice to the community. Other concerns included air quality, late night noise, severe vibrations, lack of communication, and other impacts that might be associated with a major construction project and close proximity to an interstate highway. They were particularly concerned about potential structural damages to historic homes with stone and gravel foundations as well as immediate replacement of sound barriers.

As in Bridgeport, but in a way that was tailored to the parties and circumstances in New Haven, a series of facilitated meetings were convened. The agendas for these meetings were developed in consultation with community representatives and agency project managers, among other stakeholders. At the meetings themselves, residents expressed their concerns in a thoughtful way, the project managers/implementers explained their plans and constraints, and the participants together developed ideas and steps that could be taken to improve the situation.

Early into the process, EPA's ADR Program made contact with a Connecticut-based community mediator and began to partner with New Haven's Community Mediation Center. The Community Mediation Center took over the facilitation role. Many of the stakeholders' ideas have been implemented and the dialogue continues.

LESSONS LEARNED

Pre-planning

- **Plan and budget:** In construction projects conducted near residences, especially overnight construction, planning community engagement activities and adequately budgeting resources (time, money, and in-kind efforts) is crucial and will help ensure an effective public involvement process. Public involvement commitments such as advance notification of commencement of major phases and periodic public information meetings should be included in project specifications and discussed during the pre-construction meeting. Any public involvement commitments (e.g. contractor attendance at meetings) should be **clearly stated in the contract** documents so the contractors bidding on the work are aware of them. Any work that may be needed, to address potential community concerns such as sound barriers, should be initially addressed early in the budget period and may be deleted later if deemed unnecessary.
- **Coordinate between design and construction:** For the state transportation agency responsible, coordination between design units and construction units is important. There is a process in place that requires project engineers to keep a commitment file for each project. Project managers should ensure that these commitments are communicated during each

phase of the project. Developing written summaries of commitments to communities after final design meetings can be part of the design unit responsibilities, or can be done by community organizations in the form of a letter to the agency confirming their understanding of the commitments.

- **Know the key players and their roles:** The agencies and contractors involved with a project should familiarize themselves with the community, its history, groups, and issues related to the project's activities. Community members should also know the Agency personnel, project managers, and contractors implementing the project, and most importantly, who is responsible for what at a project.
- **Identify community contacts:** The agency leading the project and the impacted community should work together to identify community groups and leaders, individual stakeholders, experts, local officials, neighborhood organizations, neighborhood revitalization zones, local libraries, churches, health and environmental organizations to measure interest in the issues and to request help reaching their members and others they believe may have an interest. Your state environmental agency or the EPA also may be able to provide assistance with identifying these important community contacts. Visit the following website for EPA and state contact information: <http://www.epa.gov/region1/ej/programcontacts.html>.

Public Meetings

- **Strategize on when and where to hold public meetings:** Hold public meetings prior to the start of the project to explain the construction timeline, work plan, and address residents concerns. However, one meeting is not enough. Continue to hold regular meetings throughout the project timeline on a regularly scheduled basis even if there are few issues for a particular meeting. It is easier to cancel a regular meeting than to schedule one in the middle of a controversy. Choose meeting locations and times that are convenient for residents. List the start and end times for meetings.
- **Develop meeting plans in consultation with a range of stakeholders:** Public meetings should be scheduled and the agenda developed collaboratively. Representatives of the community and the project managers (DOT, FHWA, contractors, etc.) should have meaningful input into the scope, timing, duration, and content of public meetings to address community concerns. There are often multiple agencies and even multiple levels of government involved in a project. When planning a meeting, efforts should be taken to ensure all participating agencies will be represented.

- **Coordinate meeting announcements to avoid unrealistic or polarizing expectations:** Meeting notices should be consistent with the agreed upon goals for the meeting. Community advocates should resist the temptation to craft provocative notices that will attract attention but prime participants for a fight.
- **Consider using neutral facilitators who can help turn a potentially explosive meeting into a productive session:** Simply inviting all of the stakeholders to sit down together without a realistic plan for how to manage the discussion can do more harm than good. The assistance of skilled neutral facilitators or mediators will enhance the likelihood that an angry and frustrated community, stressed project managers who feel under attack, and other public officials or agency representatives with their own agendas, will be able to have a constructive exchange.

Communication

- **Establish methods of communication:** Research how the community and affected public receive information and learn which sources they trust. Determine the best method for communicating with the community or affected public (e.g., electronically, mailings, meetings, door-to-door contact, advertisements, posters at construction site, radio stations, community newspapers, local cable channel, telephone, etc.). Be sure to reach agreement with the community on the chosen methods of communication.
- **Use a community liaison:** The agency leading the project and the impacted community should work together to identify a community liaison or steering committee that will assist with disseminating project information to affected residents. Similarly, the agency's single point of contact should be disseminating information and questions to the appropriate departments, contractors, or subcontractors.
- **Be accessible to the community:** The agency leading the project should identify a person who the community can contact if there are issues or concerns. Post contact information at the site. Be sure that someone can be reached outside of normal work hours for emergency situations.
- **Communicate key information about project activities:** Notify residents in advance about use of alternative routes (include official detour routes) around construction sites, dates and times when the construction will take place (e.g., night work), types of construction activities ("highly disruptive work"), potential impacts of construction activities

(e.g. traffic, loss of telephone service and other utilities), and locations of access and construction staging areas. Where possible, use before and after photos to illustrate the purpose of the work. Keep the community informed and involved as you work through barriers (e.g. extra costs, delays, adverse findings, weather and seasonal conditions). Post job signs that describe the activity, not just the name of the agency, and include an information and/or emergency hotline or website, if relevant.

- **Respond to key community concerns:** Listen to the concerns of the public. Develop options for responses to those concerns. Incorporate changes to the processes that address the most important issues, taking into account the limitations of the project, also incorporate the changes that are easy to make. Make it clear what changes are being incorporated into the project in response to community concerns.
- **Know when there are opportunities to participate:** The agencies and contractors involved with the project should help educate and provide technical assistance to the community about opportunities to participate in the decision making process as well as identifying possible options for improving the conditions surrounding the project.
- **Develop effective outreach materials:** Ensure all communications are clear, easy to read (plain English or non-English languages), and accurate. Include a contact name and number, and provide alternative contacts for non-English speakers. Be familiar with the languages spoken and be prepared to provide interpreters at meetings and translate outreach materials, when necessary.

Minimize Environmental and Public Health Impacts

- **Implement best practices or guidelines:** Implement construction best practices or guidelines to reduce noise and vehicle idling, utilize retrofitted equipment, control dust, etc. (See an initial list of references below).
- **Increase enforcement:** Increase enforcement of regulatory violations of concern to the residents that may affect community health, safety, or quality of life.
- **Include emergency preparedness:** If dealing with a hazardous substance or if there is a potential for fires or explosions, establish a process/procedure for quickly notifying residents at greatest risk. Work with first responders to find out what procedures and protocols already exist. Work with stakeholders to designate an evacuation route from the community or city, if necessary. The city may already have a route established that can be referenced.

REFERENCES

- EPA's Public Involvement Policy: <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/public/index.htm>
- How-To Brochures For Effective Public Involvement:
<http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/brochures/index.htm>
- Tools for Public Involvement: <http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/involve.htm>
- Rhode Island "Green During Construction Phase" Initiative: www.lungne.org/
- City of Boston Environment Department Guidelines for Construction:
www.cityofboston.gov/environment/pdfs/construction_guidelines.pdf
- National Cooperative Highway Research Program. Best Management Practices
for Environmental Issues Related to Highway and Street Maintenance
<http://ntl.bts.gov/lib/21000/21800/21818/PB99143489.pdf>
- Tools and Best Practices Supporting the Recovery Act:
<http://www.epa.gov/recovery/resources.html>
- U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution: <http://www.ecr.gov/>
- EPA Alternative Dispute Resolution Contacts:
http://www.epa.gov/adr/cprc_adrcontacts.html
- Diesel Engine Retrofits in the Construction Industry: A How To Guide:
<http://www.mass.gov/dep/air/diesel/conretro.pdf>
- Diesel Exhaust in New England:
http://www.epa.gov/region1/eco/diesel/assets/pdfs/diesel_brochure.pdf
- Construction Bid Specs:
<http://www.epa.gov/region1/eco/gb3/pdfs/ConstructionVehicleRetrofitSpecs.pdf>
- Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act (EPCRA):
<http://www.epa.gov/oecaagct/lcra.html>