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best practices

Building Consensus for Your Project, Part 2

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Creating relationships with the community

Throughout the country, development projects—both large and small—are being slowed or derailed. The public increasingly wants and demands a meaningful, and sometimes substantial, say in what happens in their communities. Stakeholders have become increasingly sophisticated in their ability to communicate their message and mobilize support for their cause.

As a result, a project's development team—engineers, architects, planners, lawyers, marketing, public relations, and community relations professionals—must actively involve the public early and often in the development process—well before plans are presented to municipal boards and commissions. Presenting plans that look final but lack broad-based community input puts the project timeline, and even the project itself, at great risk. Plans that are too polished, too complete, and too late for influence can provoke the public to oppose a project.

Marketing and communications professionals have a key role to play in helping members of the development team understand that there are new real estate development models to follow to ensure project and financial success. Developers need to do more than select a great location; they need to institutionalize good community relations practices by implementing strategies and tactics that demonstrate their willingness to build longterm relationships with the community.

In Part 1 of our series, we discussed how consensus building is used to create a highly functional project team. In Part 2, we move to the next stage: the pre-permitting process. Although working with elected and appointed government officials and the various boards and commissions with authority over the permitting process is obviously critical throughout this phase, we are going to focus on strategies for consensus building with other stakeholders, those informal power brokers who are often forgotten or, to the extent possible, purposely avoided.

Based on our experience working with public- and private sector clients, and extensive research looking at successful and unsuccessful permitting strategies, we believe engaging stakeholders early in the process in open, honest, two-way communication is much more likely to result in a successful project that receives support from the community.

Identifying stakeholders

It's important to involve diverse interests in the process so that anti-development interests, for example, don't outweigh economic development proponents. Town officials are helpful in identifying stakeholders, as are the local law firm, engineering firm, and public relations agency hired to assist with the permitting process. Meetings should also be set up with established groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, local minority and women business organizations, non-profit associations, and other business and community leadership groups.

It is critical to make clear that the purpose of these stakeholder meetings is to introduce the participants to the proposed project in the early stages of development in order to solicit ideas, questions, concerns, and suggestions from the community. At these meetings, participants should be given contact information and encouraged to contact the project team throughout the pre-permitting stage. Meetings should be held at intervals throughout this phase of the project.

Developers who meet with stakeholders in small, relatively informal gatherings or information sessions prior to any large public hearings not only hear what stakeholders have to say early in the process but they also create an opportunity to build a long-term relationship with the community. Developers who are armed with feedback early in the process have shown the community their willingness to listen.

According to Bernard Rogan, former spokesperson for Shaw's Supermarkets, a major New England supermarket chain, early engagement can lead to broader community acceptance of the developer and ultimately the project and the company. "At Shaw's our task was to share our corporate style in new market areas. During the entire development process we took the opportunity to constantly reinforce our culture with the community we wanted as our customer.

"In New Haven, CT, our community work began even before we started the permitting process. The selected site was a high crime location and a barrier in connecting two very different communities: Yale University and the local neighborhood. We recognized that, for our new store to be successful, we had to be a 'bridge' for these areas. Shaw's was proud to facilitate that role by serving as a positive focus for our new customers. The store is now evidence of a revitalized part of New Haven that was accomplished with our positive style and commitment to our customers and their community."

Developers who go through the motions of holding information sessions prior to the permitting process without really "hearing" what stakeholders have to say will hinder their ability to build community consensus. Developers intent on convincing the community that the project is good for them and are not willing to make some concessions reinforce, often at their peril, the common perception developers only care about making money and don't care about the community.

Active Listening

Active listening does not mean a developer has to give stakeholders everything they ask for. Rather it means respecting and acknowledging concerns, even if you don't think they are important, by providing information, explaining why you have reached another conclusion, offering to study the situation further, or making an adjustment or accommodation in the plan. As one successful Denver area developer

said: "I have learned to listen in my long career. I learned a very important lesson early on about talking versus listening."

Education is a two-way street

As important as understanding the stakeholder point of view is working with stakeholders to facilitate their understanding of the developer's perspective. Taking time to educate stakeholders about the project, including the upsides and downsides for the community, is also in the best interest of the developer. Fact sheets, Q&As, and other materials should be developed to supplement and support the information shared at the community meetings. This information should also be posted to a regularly updated project Web site.

With increased use of the internet, development teams also should explore implementing software designed to help manage the public process. For example, Neighborhood America offers Web-based applications to collect and manage citizens' reactions and input to development projects. Its Public Comment® service, developed in cooperation with IBM, provides a centralized and integrated system for developers to reach out to the public through the Web by creating and moderating online Q&A sessions, capturing and collecting public comment, and developing and delivering responses to public comments via e-mail or fax.

Information shared at meetings, in collateral, or on the Web should be clear, concise, free of jargon, and easily understood. Share the benefits the project will have on the community (e.g., taxes and jobs), explain energy conservation measures, green building practices, diversity hiring policies, or other project attributes, as well as the negatives of the project with any mitigation measures to be implemented.

Working groups help move the work forward

Another strategy we have used effectively to help us throughout the pre-permitting, permitting, and building phases is working groups. Working groups should be made up of representatives from various stakeholder groups, both supporters and opponents. By creating ongoing opportunities for open, two-way conversation, a working group can serve as a sounding board for the developer, as well as a legitimate voice for stakeholders. By regularly meeting with representatives from various stakeholder groups, developers will be able to learn about the issues that matter most to each constituency.

More than platitudes

Where once developers could largely dictate location, building design, signage, and the like, many communities today are home to more involved and vocal stakeholders who demand their officials listen to what they have to say about growth and development in their city or town. Developers often find they not only have to fight for their project

but also do battle with a community's earlier negative experiences with developers.

When such historic distrust is present, new developers must be even more prepared to engage the citizens early and often, and exhibit the patience to let neighbors vent and express frustration about the past. "Let's move forward" is an understandable statement from developers with interest accruing and anxious investors waiting.

In our view, developers are not just erecting buildings, making money, or creating spaces, they are creating, affecting, transforming, and participating in community building. Developers don't and shouldn't construct buildings without carefully thought-out plans and designs. The same holds true for relationships. One must plan and design well and early to build and maintain the relationships with constituents, who, for the time you are working, are as much yours as they are the local alderman's!

Next issue: Building consensus during the permitting stage.

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