

OPEN APPROACH GETS RESULTS

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True public participation leads to two landfill success stories.

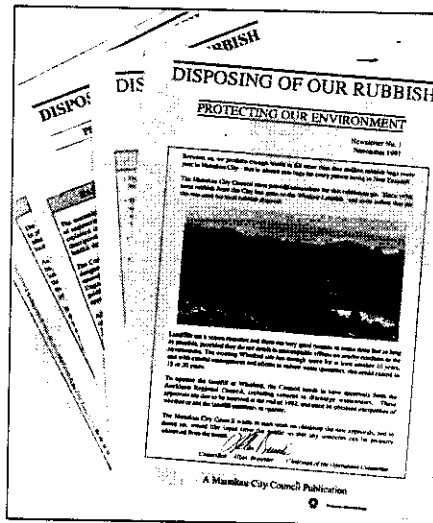
While it is very easy to pick schemes where public participation has been either non-existent or a failure, it is not so straightforward to point to a scheme where there has been unqualified success. That is not surprising, as not even the most enthusiastic promoter of nimby (not in my backyard) syndromes would expect to convince everyone in the affected community that his or her pride and joy would leave those living nearby completely unaffected. Public participation in the truest sense of the word — where the public can actually influence decisions rather than simply comment on them — is in its very early infancy in New Zealand.

In almost every completed project in New Zealand to date, public participation has been limited to opportunities to comment on the developer's proposals to varying degrees and at varying stages of their development. Most often, the first chance to comment occurred when a site had been selected and many details of the proposal were fixed. In a small number of cases, a choice of sites was placed before the public, and the public's response became an influencing factor in the final decision-making process. While this was clearly a great improvement from the public's point of view, the motives were not always determined by a social conscience or a desire to ensure the least impact, but rather to find the site which might result in the lowest level of public opposition. The two are not necessarily the same thing.

Public participation has taken on a new meaning on two landfill projects started in early 1991. The first involves a new landfill to serve the Tauranga sub-region of the Bay of Plenty. The second involves the seeking of consents to continue using an existing landfill at Whitford in Manukau City.

It is too early to determine how successful the projects will be, but the approaches being taken by the respective councils were based on the concept of partnership with the community, where the community sets the ground rules within which the councils should work.

Common elements of both projects include:



Informative newsletters published by Manukau City Council.

- progressive councils that recognised the old ways do not work in today's environment, and were prepared to try something a little different;
- a project management structure that ensured a careful mix of political, officer and specialist consultant inputs, with a series of inbuilt checks and balances to ensure a complete team approach at all stages;
- extending the project management team to include the public, by establishing a community liaison committee to represent the broad public interest before any significant technical work was started;
- inviting the public to contribute to the project from the outset by widely advertising the council's needs to secure a new landfill or new consents, again before any decisions were made or before any significant work was started;
- using a third party to facilitate communication between the councils and the public, and to act as a mouthpiece for the community as well as a specialist advisor to the councils;
- a policy of openness to the greatest extent

possible, and being seen to be responsive to community suggestions;

- a commitment to communication, communication and more communication. Regular newsletters and one-to-one or small group discussions on an ongoing basis are essential.

The single most important requirement is to establish trust. This cannot be achieved by trying to cut corners or pushing for the least onerous conditions from the council's point of view. The community is being asked to give a great deal, and for the project to be successful, the community must receive something in return.

On the Tauranga project, an introductory newsletter was sent to each of the 40,000 households in the area and a full-page story appeared in the local newspaper before anything else was done on the project. Anyone interested was invited to return a cut-out coupon and be included on a project mailing list — there are over 400 on the list.

The community liaison committee set the basic criteria to be used for selecting the new landfill site. These were sent to everyone on the mailing list for comment and they were presented at a public meeting to introduce the project before they were adopted as the basis for the technical work. The public was invited to nominate possible sites, and an array of identification techniques was used before more than 60 became the basis of a comprehensive site elimination process.

To avoid causing distress to 60 separate communities, the sites were investigated largely in confidence until the number had been reduced to three, but the site elimination process was fully documented and subsequently made available for public comment.

Considerable care was required at the time the three sites were publicly notified to avoid a public relations disaster, as has occurred on a number of projects in the past. With so many players involved, the process was complex and involved notification in a well thought-out order as follows:

- consultant's recommendations;
- input from seven officers representing three councils;
- input from six politicians representing three councils;
- input from the community liaison committee;

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- first notification to landowners concerned;
- notice to remaining 30 or so councillors of the general locality of the sites;
- meetings with individual landowners at their homes;
- individual letter drop to the local communities affected;
- press release;
- second letter drop in local communities and questionnaire seeking local information to be used in the final choice of a preferred site;
- visits to sites by politicians, with the chance to meet landowners;
- visits to sites with tangata whenua;
- public open days with visual display material and formal presentations.

As a direct result of public inputs, one of the three sites was removed from further consideration without additional technical investigation. Also, as a result of comments from the local communities and a concern about travel distances to the two remaining sites, the council reviewed all previous work and investigated innovative ways of developing sites with poorer geology closer to

Tauranga. This work is due for completion soon, and whether or not it results in a further alternative for consideration, it demonstrates the council's willingness to listen, and will remove an unknown when final decisions have to be made.

Substantial further public input will occur before a final choice of a preferred site is made.

At Whitford, the requirements are different, as the site is an existing one. The initial need was to apply for permits to replace expiring water rights. However, it was soon recognised that to make meaningful applications, the total waste management strategy for Manukau, the largest city in New Zealand, had to be finalised.

Manukau has a policy of involving the public in all major project decisionmaking, and in this case, prepared an "issues statement" as the basis for seeking comment from the general public. In addition, it held a press conference, placed full-page advertisements in local newspapers, established a mailing list, issued newsletters, held an open day at the landfill and met with adjacent landowners, all in addition to working with

the community liaison committee. Some 400 people now receive regular updates on the project.

The most exciting feature of the project, a first for New Zealand, is where adjacent landowners, the local residents, ratepayers group, and the council are working together to find an acceptable development plan for the landfill. Starting with a clean sheet of paper, the groups got together for the first time in early March to put everything on the table and work through the issues in the hope of reaching a mutually acceptable plan. Politicians, quarry operators, landfill operators and design engineers all come along from the council to meet five representatives of the local community. Once again, third-party facilitators are an important ingredient to the whole process.

So far the response from everyone, with one exception, has been enthusiastic. While there is still a long way to go, there is every reason to believe that most issues will be resolved through consultation, rather than confrontation, and everyone will gain. ■



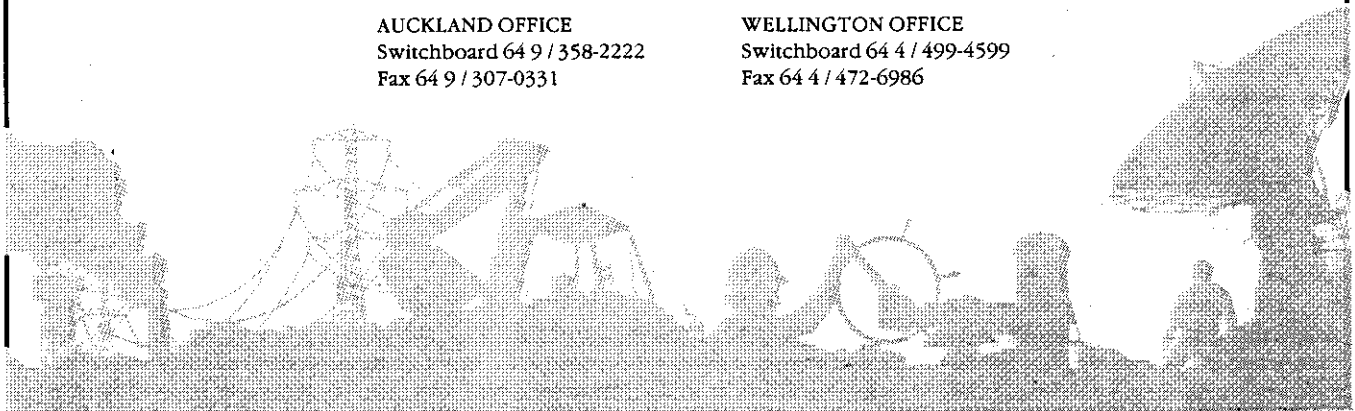
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