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BEST PRACTICE CONSULTATION ON HIGH PROFILE PROJECTS

THE EASTERN TRANSPORT
CORRIDOR CONSULTATION
INVOLVED NOT ONLY
TALKING BUT ALSO
LISTENING TO THE
COMMUNITIES AFFECTED
BY THE CORRIDOR.

Here's a scenario that everyone in Auckland is familiar with. There's been talk for 30 years - some people say 50 years - about developing a new transport corridor through Auckland's eastern suburbs. People are fed up with the congestion and unpredictability of travelling around the City of Sails. They want action - not talk.

In early 2003 Opus was commissioned to define a transport facility between Auckland City and Manukau City, via the eastern suburbs. The study was to be sufficiently detailed to enable Resource Management Act notices of requirement and resource consents to be obtained. The project involved extensive public consultation.

GETTING THE STRATEGY RIGHT

The project needed a high-level strategy, to provide the framework for the consultation.

Its aim was to ensure that consultation was undertaken in a strategic and structured manner.

The strategy was reviewed by Audit New Zealand and by Vivien Twyford, who is currently the world president of the highly regarded International Association for Public Participation.

CORE VALUES FOR CONSULTATION

In any controversial project, the consultation process can be a target for criticism. You can't avoid criticism but if you have a transparent process that is well documented and then followed, then you are on the right track. The International Association of Public Participation's "Core Values for Public Participation" were foundation stones for the Eastern Transport Corridor consultation strategy. The Association (or IAP2) works internationally to improve the processes and practice of public participation. IAP2 views consultation as any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making and uses public input to **make better decisions**.

Some of those core values are:

1. The public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the process needs of all participants.
4. The public participation process seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected.
5. The public participation process involves participants in defining how they participate.
6. The public participation process provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.



Artist's impression of view from footbridge opposite Parnell Baths on Tamaki Drive looking southwest showing future roading proposal.

In essence consultation involves the statement of a proposal not yet finally decided upon, listening to what others have to say, considering their responses and deciding what will be done.

It is clear therefore that consultation is used as part of the decision-making process. It is genuine, active, two-way dialogue that presents information, issues and options to the community and allows them the time and means to respond with their opinions and additional information. Consultation occurs **before a decision** is made and may not always result in all parties reaching agreement upon the final decision. A proposal may have been presented but the project proponent is genuinely willing to listen to community views and change the proposal as a result of consultation. Consultation also involves showing the participants how their ideas and concerns have been considered and, if appropriate, incorporated into the final decision.

GIVING PEOPLE A SAY IN DECISIONS THAT AFFECT THEM

Meaningful consultation is about **giving people a say in the decisions that affect them.**

When we embark on any consultation process we need to ask ourselves if public involvement is appropriate in the first place. For example, there's little point in consulting if the decision has already been made.

Nor is there any point in consulting if people's input is going to make no difference to the decision. Therefore, we need to ask what level of influence people will have, how their input will be used and who will make the decision. These are all questions that need answers at the outset if the consultation is going to be a genuine exercise and not just a case of ticking a legislative box. The alternative is to face criticism that the consultation process is a sham and a waste of time and money.

The Eastern Transport Corridor consultation did not start with a blank piece of paper. An earlier strategy study, Phase 1, had identified the need for the corridor and the project partners had confirmed this need through formal resolutions. This meant that one crucial decision had been made - the decision that development of the Eastern Transport Corridor was required.

Therefore, the Phase 2 study, for which Opus

was employed, was not to re-litigate or justify the "need" for the project. The need had already been established. However, this was not always clear to the people who took part in the consultation and significant time was spent going over the project's history with people who wanted an opportunity to say they did not want an Eastern Transport Corridor.

STAGING THE CONSULTATION

There were three stages of community consultation for the project. The purpose of each stage of consultation for the project was defined and stated at the outset.

In Stage 1 the aim was to "*explore the communities aspirations, identify opportunities, issues and constraints*". Opus was gathering information that would tell us what was important to the various communities along the length of the corridor, what values they had and their issues.

In Stage 2 our aim was to "*secure community feedback and any preference on options*". We had a number of preliminary options on corridors and routes to show the public and get feedback on.

Stage 3 involves informing the community of a preferred option.

By being very clear about the purpose of each consultation stage, we were able to better manage how we talked to the communities and the public's expectations of the consultation outcomes.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

The Eastern Transport Corridor was branded, in that all consultation and communication materials had a consistent and recognisable look and feel. These materials included newsletters, feedback forms, advertisements and displays.

We held consultation days at each stage to enable people to talk to us. These were informal "open houses" where people could drop in, see displays of project material, talk to project staff and fill out feedback forms. They were held in preference to public meetings, which tend to be "crowd control" and not necessarily productive in terms of sharing information.

We also had a project bus, suitably painted, that went back into the communities after the consultation days - giving people who couldn't attend a consultation day a second chance to talk with us.

A project website was also utilised and proved invaluable for providing the project background information to people, and a hotline that people could use to request more information or ask questions.

In Stage 1 of the consultation, we had 500 people attend the consultation days held on five different days in different parts of the corridor. In Stage 2, the attendance grew to 3,000, with up to 600 information-hungry people at each venue over six to seven hours. The Hotline has taken over 1,500 calls.

MEASURING SUCCESS OF CONSULTATION

It's easy to say that a consultation process "went well" or "it was good consultation". On the Eastern Transport Corridor project, we wanted to be able to measure how well we performed. Therefore, we developed Performance Indicators that would measure the success, or otherwise, of the actual application of the core principles.

Here, we were measuring the success of the process, not the public's approval of the project - that's something quite different.

The review was undertaken to demonstrate whether or not we achieved the required best practice performance indicators.

One reviewer was Vivien Twyford, the President of IAP2, who was engaged to carry out an independent audit of the Consultation Strategy and the various Consultation Stages. The project partners also had an independent audit of the Consultation Strategy carried out by Audit New Zealand. Opus also carried out random phone surveys after Stage 1 on the satisfaction of information received and generally found that people were happy.

CONCLUSION

Our conclusion is that the Eastern Transport Corridor consultation resulted in input from the community that made a valuable contribution to the Opus study. We are confident that decisions on the Eastern Transport Corridor will not only be based on technical details. As a result of the consultation, decisions will also reflect the values of the communities who will be affected by the corridor. The Eastern Transport Corridor consultation has also given us confidence that any decisions on new infrastructure are better decisions when the proponent has done more than just talk to the community - they have "listened" as well.