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ROADING AFFECTS COMMUNITIES

WHOSE PERSPECTIVE,
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YARDS? TOOLS AND
TECHNIQUES FOR
INVOLVING COMMUNITIES

We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us." This comment by Winston Churchill about architecture applies equally to planning new roading projects. There is no doubt that new roads have a profound effect on the communities they impact on.

This article examines the approach and techniques used by Transit New Zealand and Manukau City Council (project partners) to involve affected residents and communities in the Waiouru Peninsula to SHI project to plan a new road between Auckland's Southern Motorway and the burgeoning East Tamaki industrial area.

Transit and the council were intent on creating and delivering a process that gave residents and other stakeholders a genuine chance to contribute to the decision-making.

The key challenge was the melting pot of social and environmental issues. The project 'catchment' spanned two local authority areas - Auckland and Manukau. The neighbourhoods potentially most affected were ethnically and culturally diverse - English was a second language for many.

Some residents believed their "back yard" was a dumping ground for infrastructure no-one else wanted. What was in it for them? The question, from a community where few households owned a car, was understandable.

There was also a perception that the road was a "done deal" and would be built where and how the council and Transit wanted, regardless of what they said. "No-one listens," was a common response.

The aim was always to minimise the uncertainty and costs - that would result from appeals to the Environment Court - for residents as well as the project partners.

Four years later: one appeal ended up in the Environment Court from 1300 submissions and 26 appeals lodged. Was this an indication of the success of the consultation, or could more have been done?

THE PROJECT

A direct road link from East Tamaki to the Southern Motorway, via the Waiouru Peninsula, had been "on the cards" for more than 30 years. In 1998 Manukau City Council and Transit dusted

off the old plans and took a fresh look at the options.

Opus International Consultants was awarded the contract to identify the best route and how it should connect to the Southern Motorway. While the new road would be in Manukau City, any connection to the Southern Motorway would require changes to the motorway interchange at Otahuhu, in Auckland City.

The communities potentially most affected were Wymondley south of the Tamaki River, and Otahuhu East north of the river. In both, homes were at risk.

PLANNING THE CONSULTATION

A good deal of time and effort went into planning the consultation, including finding out about the communities to be consulted. What was their ethnic mix? How did they receive information - example, by reading local newspapers, at church, through school newsletters? Where in their neighbourhoods would they be happy to go to talk about the proposals?

The consultation and communication strategy was to avoid the temptation to manage debate. This was not an exercise in persuasion or issues management - the issues needed to be debated. Therefore, the focus was on ensuring that people had accurate and appropriate information. Expectations of the consultation were to be managed. Managing expectations also meant asking the right questions and making sure that people knew how their information would be used in the decision-making process. Therefore, information to the public was always to include key messages about the planning processes and timing.

Information was to be open and honest. No massaging of the facts - it was to be told the way it was. To facilitate this people would always have a name and telephone number to call for more information.

Challenges were posed by the dynamic nature of the project. As options developed and changed, so too did the issues and the stakeholders. As a result, the consultation techniques changed frequently. They needed to, in order to respond to new issues and new stakeholders as the project

moved through its various stages. For example, what began as a broad community-wide consultation on route options narrowed down to targeted communication with directly affected property owners and interest groups after a preferred option was confirmed.

IMPLEMENTING THE PLANS

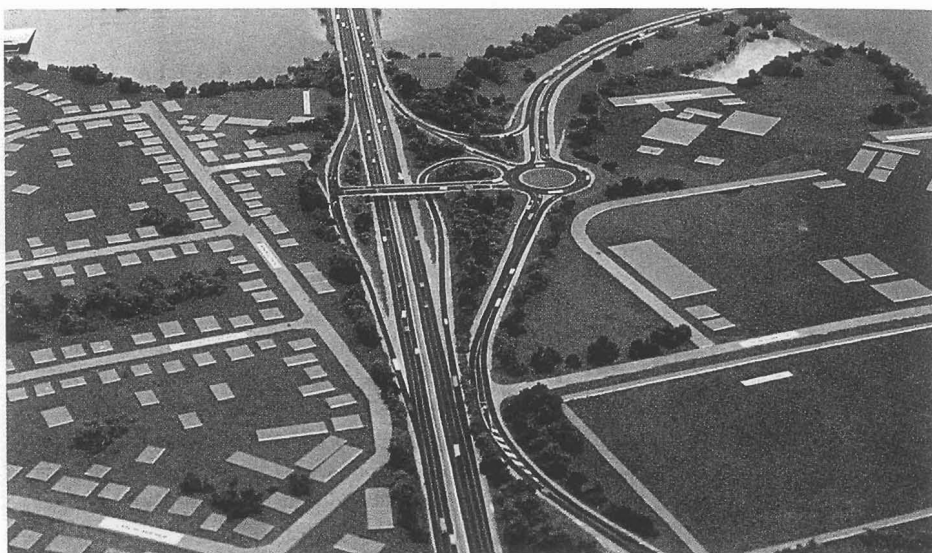
A Community Liaison Committee (CLC), a management forum comprising both staff and political representatives of Transit New Zealand and Manukau and Auckland city councils and community boards, was crucial to the success of the consultation. Its members ensured that all community concerns were identified and that the consultation and communication was appropriate and understandable for the people communities being consulted.

The importance of establishing information tools and channels people could trust was recognised. Rather than rely on the media, the project established its own newsletter the *Tamaki Crossing Update*. The newsletter eventually ran to 14 editions, with between 6000 and 8000 distributed each time mainly to letterboxes and through local libraries. Some difficulties were encountered with newsletter distribution given the significant amount of junk mail people receive (sometimes the newsletters were thrown out by households) and the "No circulars" signs on letterboxes.

Recognising that public meetings frequently generate more "heat than light" they were not included in the consultation plan. Instead, the team opted for 'open houses' as a consultation technique that would facilitate more constructive exchanges of information. A number of public meetings did however take place, but these were arranged by community groups and attended by project representatives where appropriate.

The venues and timing of open houses were carefully planned to make them as accessible and convenient for residents and stakeholders (rather than project staff) as possible. Local schools proved the most popular venues and afternoon and early evening 'open times' worked well for most people, particularly when toys were also provided to occupy children. Attendance varied with the different stages and project phases with the first series attracting more than 200 people. All open houses gave people an opportunity to see concept drawings and plans, talk to planners and politicians and to give both verbal and written feedback.

Feedback received was considered an integral



part of preparing the draft Environmental Impact Assessment in the decision-making for a preferred option in the Final Scheme Assessment report ("SAR") and Assessment of Environmental Effects. Newsletters informed those who contributed feedback and the wider public how their views and issues had been dealt with.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF AFFECTED PROPERTY OWNERS

No amount of consultation and public communication was going to meet the specific needs of people whose properties would be directly affected by the project. Responding to property concerns would require "one-on-one" consultation from the project inception.

The approach adopted was to ensure that affected landowners were communicated with directly and quickly once any decisions were made. They should not get the news from their neighbours or the media. Also, directly affected landowners needed to be able to access information when and how they needed it - not necessarily when and how was most convenient to the project team.

Once a preferred option was determined Auckland and Manukau city councils appointed community liaison officers for each of the communities (one in each city) where properties would be required. Their role was to ensure that directly affected residents were well informed about the project, the process of property acquisition and their rights to compensation. The liaison officers were to be the voice on the end of the telephone and the person who turned up on their doorstep when needed. We believe the benefit of the relationships built at this early stage assisted in appeal settlements.

As the project entered the formal RMA processes of lodging Notices of Requirement and applications for resource consents, the community liaison officers were replaced by 'planning

advocates'.


Two experienced and independent planners were employed by Manukau City Council and Transit New Zealand to help residents to prepare submissions - previously unheard of on roading projects of this nature. The result was informed and focused submissions that helped to address the specific concerns of affected landowners constructively and effectively.

CONCLUSIONS

The combination of a community liaison committee, newsletters, open homes, one-on-one consultation, community liaison officers and planning advocates added up to a level of consultation seldom seen in New Zealand before.

It included both successes and failures. For example, the open houses held in Otahuhu were well used by the residents there. Across the river at Wymondley, only a handful of people turned up to an open house held on a very wet afternoon - no-one had thought through what happens in wet weather when people don't have cars. Why not put on free taxis or a shuttle bus?

Cultural issues loomed large, particularly once directly affected properties had been identified. How, for example, should the project deal with issues relating to placenta buried according to Pacific Island and Maori custom in the garden?

The unanswered questions just go to show that there is no silver bullet - consultation will always throw up the unexpected. However, when the consultation is structured and planned around agreed principles and objectives - as happened on the Waiouru Peninsula project - the project is unlikely to be thrown by the unexpected. 

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