

Major Projects Benefit from Public Consultation

By Garry Keegan



All over the world there has been a rapid increase in public controversy as citizens demand a say in infrastructural and development projects both at local and national level.

Good public consultation costs money but poor public consultation costs more. In addition to the direct costs of good public consultation, there are risks that competitors or interest groups will try to exploit the disclosure and consultation process for their own ends. On balance, however, the risks of failing to consult adequately outweigh the risks of consultation and disclosure. There are many cases in which project sponsors have incurred significant penalties for ineffective public consultation. These include delays, weakened negotiating positions and damaged public images.

In Ireland a general culture of consultation needs to be encouraged so that public participation in the planning process becomes natural and inevitable. In recent years many large infrastructure projects have incurred unnecessary and very costly penalties. These include projects such as Dublin Port Tunnel, the M50 (Carrickmines controversy), the M3 (Hill of Tara controversy), N11 (Glen of the Down controversy), Luas, Corrib Gas Pipeline and Lansdowne Road Stadium. It seems that every day in Ireland we read of objections and problems on proposed major and very necessary infrastructures such as public transport (road and rail), incinerators, airport extensions, telecom masts, high rise buildings, industrial plants, toll roads, interpretative centres, jails and so forth.

Objections to development proposals such as these in Ireland and, indeed, throughout the world, create a ground swell of discontent and frustration among individual governments, the general public and a broad spectrum of professionals, business people and local authorities. Criticisms from objectors (and sometimes professional agitators) focus on project costs, transparency and delays but, ironically, the fact that these objections sometime take

years to resolve can cost a project twice as much in project delays and cost overruns.

Many public managers, engineers and other professionals resent the fact that concerned citizens are increasingly trespassing on their territory. These intruders are questioning professional judgements, demanding public enquiries and often delaying or even defeating proposed projects.

As new media technologies make information accessible to increasing numbers of people, more and more of those people now feel capable of challenging decisions that will affect their lives and, consequently, they have been demanding a say in those decisions. Unless the public's demands for involvement are heeded, decisions can prove meaningless in the face of the public's apathy or active opposition.

Public opposition to projects today stems from a number of factors. The basic social, political and economic climate has changed during the past decade or so. We used to have relatively small communities which changed slowly and were inhabited by much the same kinds of people. They respected authority and were generally satisfied with life. Today, we typically have larger communities where social change is rapid, the population is heterogeneous, and people distrust authorities and experts. Many people have high levels of generalised anxiety due to threats posed by inflation, economic instability and unemployment. Those who used to accept the negative side-effects of progress now tend to stand and fight.

People resist change when they do not understand or agree with the goals, methods, sponsor or timing of the proposed change. Keeping the public in the dark is often a recipe for disaster.

Public consultation plays a critical role in raising awareness of a project's impacts and gaining agreement on management and technical approaches in order to maximise benefits and reduce negative consequences. Furthermore, consulting and collaborating with the public makes good business sense. Public consultation can lead to reduced financial risk (from delays, legal disputes, and negative publicity), direct cost



Public Consultation 23

The Millau Viaduct, a large cable-stayed road-bridge that spans the valley of the River Tarn near Millau in southern France. It is the tallest vehicular bridge in the world, with one mast's summit at 343 metres - slightly taller than the Eiffel Tower and only 38 metres shorter than the Empire State Building. Compared to other jurisdictions, public consultation is not being employed to any great extent on major infrastructural projects in Ireland.

In addition to the advantages for the project, public consultation may provide project sponsors with significant opportunities to benefit people living in the proposed project area(s). Consultation can help make corporate investments more effective by identifying communities' priority needs and designing locally appropriate responses. Greater interaction with their communities may increase local employees' commitment and morale. The goodwill generated by the project may help build local support, which can be valuable to the project sponsor if unanticipated problems occur.

Des Connor, one of the world's leading authorities and developers of the public participation process, has designed and managed over 300 public consultation and social impact assessment programmes across Canada. Beginning in the 1960s when he first began working in the field of public participation, he has developed the concept of 'constructive citizen participation' and as he puts it 'over the years and through many mistakes, invented or borrowed the tools needed to make it work'.

Connor holds that 'social technology' is needed to prevent and resolve public controversy and that it includes these basic elements:

- understand the people and the communities affected by a proposal;
- provide residents with relevant information in an understandable form;
- listen to their responses and revise the proposal to reflect public concerns as much as possible;
- interest, inform and involve relevant community organisations;
- discover, inform and involve the usually silent majority who are often ignored;
- as a result of this process, develop informed, visible, majority public acceptance and support for valid proposals.

In conclusion, consulting well can save you time and money and result in a better and more popular scheme. Consult badly and you can end up in court. Public consultation provides additional scope and opportunity for negotiations and communications between applicants, local planning authorities and would-be appellants. Compared to other jurisdictions, public consultation is not being employed to any great extent on major infrastructural projects in Ireland as a technique to help gain public acceptance. By employing the art of public consultation as a serious business function and implementing the techniques it has to offer, major projects that would otherwise prove difficult could be delivered more efficiently and effectively without the cost and time overruns that frustrate so many and attract so much negativity and acrimonious debate.

Garry Keegan is a director of Acumen Public Consultation Services and can be contacted at info@acumenconsult.ie

 **HOMESCAPE LTD.**
FIRE RESISTANT DOORS • SECURITY DOORS • DOOR CORES

- QUALITY VENEERED, LAMINATED
STANDARD & OFF STANDARD FIRE RESISTANT
DOORS & DOOR BLANKS
- STREBORD® FD.30 & FD.60 FIRE RESISTANT
DOOR CORES. BM TRADA Q-MARK
(FIRE DOORS). CERTIFICATE NO. 6/020
- HEAVY DUTY EXTERNAL/SECURITY DOORS
- INTUMESCENT FIRE AND SMOKE SEALS

Office & Warehouse

Unit B3-6, The Square,
Greenogue Business Park
Rathcoole, Co. Dublin.

Tel.: (01) 458 9331 Fax: (01) 458 9637

E-mail: info@homescape.ie

- Manufacturers Agents •
- Importers • Distributors •

savings, increased market share (through good public image), and enhanced social benefits to local communities.

Information is critical to the effective participation of affected citizens near the project. An informed public will better understand the trade-offs between project benefits and disadvantages and be able to contribute meaningfully to project design.

Consulting with the public involves those people who are directly and indirectly affected by a project and other interested parties who have the ability to influence a project's outcome, positively or negatively.

These are known as stakeholders and may include project affected people such as individuals and families living near the project, or indigenous groups and their traditional leaders; the project sponsor; public sector representatives, such as local elected officials and local and central government departments; organisations such as local, national, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities and research centres, and religious groups; and other private sector companies and business associations. Identifying all stakeholders, especially the poor and marginalised, is essential to producing good consultation results.

Good public consultation can generate positive financial and commercial benefits for a project sponsor.

It is critical to gain and maintain local public and government support for the project. Political opposition, legal action or local social unrest can delay a project and can be extremely costly. Consultation can open the lines of communication and help resolve issues before they lead to conflict, reducing financial losses due to delays.

Local know-how, shared through public consultation, can often help a project sponsor identify cost-effective mitigation measures. For example, using consultation to identify potential job opportunities on the project for local people not only satisfies local economic and social interests but can lead to significant savings on accommodation and transport for the project sponsor.

