Overcoming Community Roadblocks

BY JAMES A. KENT

While speaking with a colleague about the hurdles he was experiencing in getting his wind energy project approved, I was struck by an increasing opposition to large-scale alternative energy projects, including his. If the new project would provide the community with a clean energy source, then why was he facing local opposition?

Over the years, we have learned that local communities simply want some predictability over events that affect them. If they feel a loss of control over their future because of a project, they will act to maintain control, often through formalized resistance. However, if they are involved up front and see how the project can help them achieve their future goals, then they are more open to cooperation.

Disruptive issues can easily sabotage a project. To prevent this from occurring, it is critical to understand how communities absorb change – before seeking project approval.

Challenge

On the Hawaiian island of Oahu, we became involved with a wind farm project. The project proponent was in need of approval for the construction of wind turbines near Kahuku Point, where a popular resort was located. The project supporters were under the impression that their technical design would get approved through public contact during the formal review process. Since wind is a clean energy source, they thought it would be acceptable to everyone.

What the proponent did not realize was that there were five very culturally different communities who were being impacted, and each had their own way of dealing with new projects. These were rural areas where citizens had mobilized in the past to fight development projects. Disruption was a way of life, and reacting negatively had become an automatic response mechanism.

Solution

A strategy was needed that would create opportunity for the citizens to participate with the wind developers, rather than react to them. The first step was to access the informal community networks to identify and resolve emerging and existing issues while preventing disruptive ones from occurring. For instance, we discovered that the village elders were mainly concerned about the project's ability to affect the education and work opportunities for their youth. This was an issue that could be successfully addressed.

By having open discussions with the citizens, their issues could surface and be addressed, thereby taking anger and reaction off the table. Their natural communication networks, and not formal meetings, were used to ensure that information could easily be exchanged in a safe setting. To address the concerns raised by the elders, a youth education program in wind science and development was established. Local citizens were hired and trained to construct and manage the visitor center, as well as to work on assembling the wind machines. The proponent agreed to provide start-up money for businesses that could evolve from the development activity. All of the physical environmental impacts were resolved in the same collaborative spirit. By incorporating mutually-beneficial mitigations, this became one of the few development projects on Oahu to avoid citizen opposition.

Getting Citizens Involved Early

There is a greater chance of gaining community ownership if a project proponent takes the time to understand and address citizen issues at the formative stage. Citizens want to participate in evaluating how they can benefit from the impact a project will have on them. There are three stages of issue management and recognizing them can lead to successful collaboration.

Emerging issues are born when citizens are uncertain about how a proposed change will affect their ability to protect and maintain control of their lives. Addressing issues as this stage will prevent them from escalating to a higher level.

Existing issues are revealed when people react to a perceived direct threat from the project. This occurs when the project supporters fail to identify and respond to the emerging issues. Options are diminished at this stage, however, negotiations are still feasible to resolve the issues and prevent opposition groups from forming.

Disruptive issues occur when citizens feel they have completely lost their ability to protect and maintain control of their environment. At this stage, it is likely that someone else, generally the courts and administrative bodies, will decide the outcome. Imposed solutions are rarely satisfactory to either side. This not only drains resources and drives up costs, but goodwill is lost and distrust sets in.

By collaborating with those affected by the project, the power of citizen-based stewardship can work to the benefit of the project and the people impacted.
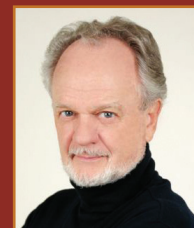
James A. Kent

James A. Kent is a global social ecologist with expertise in crafting empowered partnerships between corporations, communities and governments. As President of JKA Group, Jim is an advocate for using culture-based strategies when introducing site/corridor projects to local communities. Join our blog at jimkent.wordpress.com.