

THE OATMEAL CIRCUIT

Using gathering places to foster project success

BY KEVIN PREISTER

The use of gathering places and working with informal networking are key components of a social ecology approach to infrastructure projects. In order to make these concepts more visible, we decided to share a story about an infrastructure approval process that delivered the vote for the Denver International Airport (DIA) to be built at its present location. The project involved a formal campaign that was being waged to secure voter approval for obtaining the land upon which to build the airport. At the 11th hour, with only five weeks to go before the election, the pro-annexation campaign was trailing in the polls by five percentage points. If nothing changed, there would be no new airport.

This is the story of how Denver International Airport got political, social and cultural alignment that allowed it to be built at its current site. According to the Denver Post newspaper, “The Colorado General Assembly brokered a deal in 1985 to annex a 40+ acre plot of land in Adams County into the city of Denver, and use that land to build a new airport. Adams County voters approved the plan in a referendum in November 1988.”





Unexpected Opposition

In Colorado, there is a state law that does not allow annexation from one jurisdiction to another without the approval of the voters of the jurisdiction from which the land is to be annexed. Denver needed over 40 acres of Adams County land in order to have the qualified land base to build the new Denver International Airport. Because of the success of the existing 1985 brokered deal, opposition to this annexation from Adams County citizens and politicians was completely unexpected. As a result, the pro-airport campaign was failing to persuade Adams County voters to approve the annexation of the land. It had spent approximately \$1.2 million in media ads and brochures “selling” the benefits of a new airport by using the usual newspaper interviews

and ads extolling the virtues and benefits of this new airport for citizens of Adams County.

It is customary for project management to use the tools of the formal system to influence the delivery of a project. This is especially true when a project becomes disrupted by public opposition. When disruption occurs, project management mobilizes public relations firms, lobbyists and multi-media campaigns organized for TV and other media outlets. The object is to persuade the public that the project is a good contribution to the health and welfare of the community.

Bringing in JKA

Late in the process—with the land annexation vote looking like it would lose—the airport committee asked then-Governor of Colorado, Roy Romer, to intervene and take charge of the campaign. His mission was to persuade Adams County citizens and businesses to support the annexation effort.

This is why five weeks before the vote in November of 1988, Jim Kent found himself answering a phone call from Governor Romer and staff member, Judy Harrington. The governor explained that the formal campaign was not going well and that if the vote were “taken today,” Denver would lose the vote by five points and the airport could not be built at its current location. The governor wanted to know what could be done to turn this election around. He asked if JKA’s informal networking approach “could assist in turning this election.” This was no small order when there was only five weeks left to get into the field!

JKA requested two days to evaluate the situation and determine what

was going on with the Adams County people who would vote on this referendum. By doing a social scan of the area and by dropping into several gathering places, the JKA team found what they needed: the “fatal flaw” that was bringing the campaign for annexation approval down to defeat.

JKA had discovered what is termed in the social ecology process as an “embedded issue.” Apparently, there existed a common belief that “there would be no jobs or business opportunities at DIA for Adams County people.” This was not true, but it had the characteristics of an embedded issue—one that is reinforced daily through trusted word-of-mouth communication. What JKA now knew was that the existing formal campaign would never be able to effectively penetrate the false narrative that had become accepted by the community. To persuade the people that this rumor was just not true, a different plan was needed.

New Course of Action

The Governor was informed that for the next five weeks, he would be needed every morning from 6:30 am to 8:00 am to visit every coffee shop in Adams County. He was to bring no paper to write on or handouts and was not allowed to use “talking points” or “sell talk.” He had to listen to the people and if he needed to draw something, he should “draw on a napkin.” The team working with the Governor needed to find the real issues that the people had and respond to them. Of course, there were no substantive issues to refute since the rumor of “no jobs, no business opportunities at DIA” was not true.

In addition, every Saturday the Governor would attend the flea markets to visit the booths and talk to the vendors about their issues and observations. Vendors are natural

communicators who are plugged into many and diverse community networks. Finally, the Governor's Mansion (with Governor Romer present) was to be made available every Sunday between 2:00 pm and 4:00 pm for all of the barbers, beauticians and bartenders (The 3 Bs) in Adams County to come in and talk over what they were hearing, and to get factual information into their hands through face-to-face communication.

Part of the JKA Discovery Process is to find out how information in a community is transmitted and what systems are trusted. From the gathering places to the flea markets, all of the people were natural communicators in their respective networks and they moved information informally throughout Adams County. JKA had found that these natural communication networks had the theme of "no jobs and businesses" routinely embedded in their talk with customers.

The Results

Very quickly, the social ecology approach began helping to clarify the issues in these word-of-mouth networks. Enhanced by the governor, the new knowledge that there were indeed "jobs and business opportunities" at DIA replaced the myths and rumors that the formal (and expensive) campaign could not penetrate.

Kent's team would go back into the gathering places after the governor's visits to answer questions, provide details and see if the dialogue had changed. This closing of the communication loop was a key part for the success of the citizen engagement process. In five short weeks, this informal network and gathering place campaign turned the election

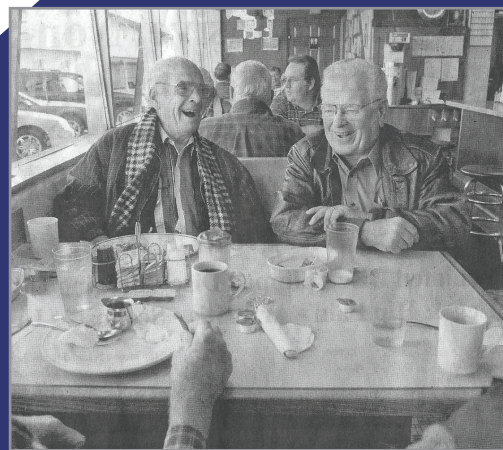
from a sure five-point defeat into a four-point win—a nine-point change. Turnarounds in community support happening within a few short weeks are almost unheard of with infrastructure projects.

A Strategy for Success

Governor Romer had attended 165 breakfast sessions during that five weeks. In honor of these efforts, this social ecology process is known as the "Oatmeal Circuit" to this day and it was talked about in the political circles of Colorado for some time. After the vote, Mayor Peña of Denver presented Governor Romer with a box of Quaker Oats to celebrate the method.

The Oatmeal Circuit was designed by JKA to assist local citizens in empowering themselves through participating in the process of finding truth and facts instead of being misled by rumors and half-truths. After all, the finding of truth and facts is an essential part of a community realizing its ability to participate in projects that affect them. Through information and knowledge development made possible by the governor's visits, community residents found that there actually were opportunities at the new airport that they could take advantage of.

So who planted and propagated the rumors and half-truths? It was the work of outsiders who had a corporate agenda that needed to produce a vote against the annexation for their own financial gain. Had they prevailed in their narrow interests, they would have deprived the citizens of Adams County of this great social and economic opportunity. Also lost would have been the opportunity for the citizens, as well as the governor, to learn how to better engage and participate in important projects that impact themselves and their community. ☘



During the five weeks that Governor Romer spent talking to the citizens of Adams County, he frequented this café in northern Adams County where planes from one of the new runways at DIA would come close to overflying. In this newspaper photo, Governor Romer can be seen in a booth with several people standing around, including Jim Kent. The governor was listening intently to Mildred, a chicken and egg farmer in the area who was concerned about the planes flying overhead and making noise. She worried that so much noise would cause her chickens to stop laying eggs.

"Tell you what Mildred," the governor responded in the blink of an eye, "If you will consider the benefits of a new airport, I will talk to our College of Agriculture to see if they can breed some chickens that are deaf."

Everyone relaxed and had a good laugh. Just like that, the governor had several more supporters. Formal approaches to securing project approval are increasingly encountering challenges and not producing the desired results. The alternative approach discussed in this story shows that it can identify the obstacles and determine a better path forward. That alternative approach, now introduced to the IRWA as Social Ecology, uses gathering places and informal networking as two of its tools to help create productive citizen engagement and successful projects.



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