



PROJECTS IN THE PUBLIC EYE

BY JOAB ORTIZ

A proactive approach to community relations can safeguard a company's reputation and keep projects on schedule

For utility companies, their reputation, goodwill and customer relationships can be their greatest assets. Building a positive relationship with customers can take years of hard work by a team of dedicated customer service and community relations professionals. But the results are worth it, especially when the company earns the desired reputation — one of a concerned, involved and responsive member of the community where their utility services play a critical role in the quality of life.

When electrical utility companies embark on new and upgraded transmission lines that touch many customers where they live and work, these hard-earned reputations are on the line. Regardless of its size and scope, managing the personal impact of a construction project is a difficult balancing act. For today's mega projects, it's an extreme challenge.

Yet, residents and businesses have a right to know if and when a new project is being planned in their community, especially if it will affect them directly. We've all seen what can happen when the people most impacted by a project are the last to know. Public outrage can quickly surface, advocacy groups can form and the consequences can be detrimental to the entire project. If only project proponents would do some on-the-ground research and due diligence, they could save time, money and goodwill within the community.

The Value of Community Relations

When the United States' power grid was originally conceived and built, landowners typically accepted the fact that easements were required for construction. They understood the need for the new infrastructure projects, and the easement was simply each property owner's responsibility. However, many stakeholders today feel empowered to speak out and assert their will on public projects in ways that range from damaging a company's reputation to sometimes shutting down projects entirely.

The good news is that implementing the right tools and processes can defuse conflict early and move projects forward with community support and understanding. That can mean a better customer relationship after the project has been built.

Once a company makes it a priority to create the right image and cultivate beneficial relationships, they must be willing to invest the time, resources and money to make this happen.

Early Involvement

Throughout the life of a billion-dollar transmission program, a community relations team has hundreds, maybe

even thousands of conversations with regulators, local officials, residents and business owners. Building and maintaining these relationships is essential, however the key element to success is ensuring an open and ongoing dialogue throughout the lifecycle of a project.

In managing large-scale utility projects, experience has enabled the Burns & McDonnell community relations teams to take a proactive approach to stakeholder communications. The company's previous experience on large, successfully managed projects like the Northeast Utilities' Middletown-Norwalk Project completed in 2009, honed its approach to community outreach.

By building stakeholder contacts early, even before the siting process begins, utilities have the ability to reach key opinion leaders who can affect the decisions. You also begin establishing those relationships and contacts with local officials and residents who will be involved down the road. Getting involved during the project's planning phase is critical.

"Integrating community relations with a comprehensive program management approach puts the project team on the ground from the very beginning through closeout," said Patricia Bandzes,

Burns & McDonnell's Community Relations Manager on the New England East-West Solution project for Northeast Utilities. She was involved in building that project's community relations efforts from the earliest stages of construction. "Through a methodical analysis of the areas touched by a project, we can identify those that are likely to spur challenges based on the number of residents, necessary tree clearing, proximity to schools, day care centers or other high-visibility public areas. We can focus our resources on the highest needs and potentially avoid pitfalls."

Early involvement also puts more information in the hands of officials. By keeping legislators, government agency staff and municipal leaders informed from the start, they are able to respond knowledgeably to inquiries at every stage. They can demonstrate awareness and refer residents to the project team for resolution.

A Case of Opposition

In 2008, a well-organized group of citizens from two communities formed to oppose the Maine Power Reliability Project, which required the construction of a new 345kV transmission line within an existing corridor. When the Burns & McDonnell community relations team applied for permits with the Maine Public Utilities Commission (PUC), the citizens group intervened.

The PUC, in response to the citizens group and abutters who opposed the transmission line, said they would only grant permission under one caveat – that approval would be deferred until further negotiations on design, vegetation clearing and buffering were completed and resubmitted for review.

The eleven dedicated community relations professionals from Burns & McDonnell who were assigned to the project quickly teamed up with the project's engineering staff and Central Maine Power regulatory officials to map out a plan to meet the PUC's requirements. It was clear that direct dialog with each of the abutters was



By maintaining a one-on-one dialog with the affected abutters, the community relations team significantly reduced the utility's risk of schedule delays and cost increases.

Using the latest technology with Google Earth data, representatives for the Greater Springfield Reliability Project can give property owners an up-close and personal glimpse at how the project route affects their property.

needed, along with group discussions through the Central Maine Power ombudsman. More than 260 residents along the seven-mile line were polled to determine the preferred engineering options. Site walks with neighborhood groups were conducted, as well as face-to-face negotiations with a core group of the interveners, the ombudsman and the project team.

Maintaining the Dialogue

In resolving the concerns of property owners, Community Relations Manager Drew McMullin served as the point person for Central Maine Power, and worked with the third-party ombudsman appointed by the PUC. By presenting Central Maine Power's voice in the negotiations and maintaining a dialog with the abutters, he helped significantly reduce the utility's risk of schedule delays and cost increases. Less than five percent of the more than 3,000 abutting property owners actually reached the ombudsman's consideration.

"When dealing with the public, you must keep three key factors in mind," Drew said. "You must fulfill the promises you make, you must be an ambassador of the client and the project and uphold the company's reputation regardless of the issue, and you must serve as part mediator, part sounding board." Drew asserted that having an understanding of how a utility works, knowledge of the expectations of the federal, state and municipal permit requirements, as well as the empathy to deal with the public during times of change will create a successful community relations program. Through his front-line role, Drew is currently developing a system of protocols and effective techniques that will apply to community relations initiatives in other regions and other industries.



After nearly a year of negotiations, the PUC approved the new design in 2010, as well as the plan for vegetation management and construction. As of today, this 345kV transmission line, which was once a point of dispute, is nearly complete and ready for service.

Staying Focused on the Impact

The economic impact of transmission projects goes far beyond construction jobs and electrical system reliability. These projects affect the daily life of residents and can wield an economic impact far beyond the construction jobs they create.

For example, the "Big E" is an annual 17-day fair celebrating the agriculture, food and entertainment offerings of New England. Each September, the event attracts more than 1.2 million visitors to the fairgrounds in West Springfield, MA. As one might imagine, the fair organizers have a vested interest in minimizing any construction obstacles that could potentially create the need for road closures or restrictions in the area.

For Northeast Utilities' Greater Springfield Reliability Project, where the construction work is located primarily in urban areas, the community relations group became involved early on. They understood the importance of the annual event, not just financially, but

from a public relations standpoint as well. In response, Northeast Utilities and the project team worked to adjust the construction schedule and keep crews working in other areas during the fair.

Similarly, many of the transmission rights of way on the Maine Power Reliability Project route were critical to winter snowmobiling traffic in the state. This popular winter activity in the heavily forested region brings an estimated \$261 million of revenue to the state each year, according to the Maine Snowmobile Association. The cleared rights of way essentially become highways for snowmobilers and other outdoor enthusiasts. In other words, closing these rights of way, even temporarily, was not an option.

By working with local clubs and the department of conservation, alternate routes were created that would get people through to their weekend destinations. This enabled the work to continue without damaging the power company's reputation in the communities it serves.

Listening to Every Neighbor

In the project's initial planning phase, hosting community relations meetings can play a significant role in relationship-building. Maine has a local permitting process, and one project impacted residents that spanned across 75 towns. Multiple meetings were held



At an open house held for the Greater Springfield Reliability Project, project representatives reviewed the proposed and alternative route maps with local property owners.



in each town, in addition to the five statewide meetings held at the very beginning. Regardless of a property owner's request, a community relations person is in contact with every neighbor who has brought concerns to these meetings.

"Large transmission projects can be highly impactful to residents. Often, they feel unheard," noted John Troiano, Burns & McDonnell community relations specialist. "The public needs to feel they have a liaison on the project. Our teams are out there every day, meeting with people, knocking on doors, addressing concerns. We learn about the wedding reception at their house that's coming up or their dog that gets nervous from seeing strangers. We can work with contractors to protect our client's reputation with its customers."

Community relations specialists also work with residents and businesses of all types along the route to accommodate a wide range of traffic demands, which can be difficult to coordinate. In one case in Maine, where the territory is more rural, one affected property owner was teaching organic farming. The farm's plantings were planned years in advance, so the owners needed to know exactly where the construction would be taking place over the entire length of the project schedule.

With hundreds of conversations taking place throughout a project's life, retaining and utilizing the information gleaned from those conversations is a critical point in satisfying stakeholders. The utility company's credibility requires that even the smallest details are recorded and monitored throughout the project schedule. For example, in one case, a donut shop was concerned that the nearby construction would block their drive-through entrance. With most of their business taking place in the early morning hours, the community relations staff was able to accommodate the retailer by minimizing construction during those critical hours.

Tools of the Trade

The necessary components of an effective community relations program depend on the specific needs of a client and the company's long-term goals. Every organization involved in public communications has a toolbox full of techniques for reaching out. On large-scale electrical transmission projects, pulling out all the stops is critical. A key facet of any community relations program is a thorough documentation system, which allows management and field personnel the ability to access historic agreements with abutters, as well as log details of contacts for future



The Greater Springfield Reliability Project required 39 miles of new and reconstructed overhead transmission lines in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Roughly 4,000 abutting properties were impacted.

Deemed the largest construction project in the state's history, the Maine Power Reliability Project required six new substations and upgrades to 41 others to accommodate the 440 miles of new/rebuilt transmission lines.



protection against liability and claims. Once the documentation system is in place, the scope of the community relations program must be fully defined. This entails a strategic outline of goals and deadlines, often using a charter or project execution plan as a foundation.

Identifying and coordinating the right communication tools is a crucial step. Newsletter mailings and emails are highly effective, and Burns & McDonnell uses customized mailing lists of direct and nearby abutters to keep everyone informed and to announce upcoming public meetings.

Depending on the situation and environment, group settings are organized in the form of public hearings, town hall meetings and open house information sessions. When the community relations program calls for one-on-one contact within the community, direct contact is made with those who have expressed concerns in a group setting. This can involve an in-home visit to address potential concerns and complaints, knocking on doors before construction begins and leaving notices for residents not at home. We also establish a project hotline, where we can provide responses by phone, email and website.

Staffing these highly-skilled teams is another key step, and a project's size and scope will determine the number of community relations specialists needed. We have found that individuals with a varied background in education, media relations, public relations, construction or municipal government are good candidates.

Follow Through is Key

Central Maine Power credits the community relations group as being instrumental in its efforts to keep its construction moving forward and avoiding costly delays that often result with unhappy abutters.

"These folks in the field are very professional and well-versed in their customer service skills," said Doug Herling, Vice President of Special Projects for Central Maine Power. "They took ownership of dealing directly with abutters and municipalities in the path of the Maine Power Reliability Project. As we moved into construction, the community relations group effectively resolved several very complex abutter issues to the satisfaction of both parties while timely enough to avoid construction delays."

The end of construction isn't the end of the road for the community relations teams. They remain in the community when the project is complete, fulfilling the project owner's commitments to restore property for residents and communities. "We're like the special forces — first in and last out," said John.

"These restoration efforts can take a year and a half or more, but they are critical in maintaining the hard-earned positive relationships utilities have built day in and day out."

Change for the Better

As explained by Chuck Bell, Manager of Stakeholder Relations for Burns & McDonnell, many utility companies have customer relations teams, but that doesn't necessarily mean they have the capacity to tackle multi-year, mega-scale programs. "It has become critical to have a plan in place from the beginning and ensure that it is funded accordingly. From permitting through construction and activation of the line, community relations initiatives can play a crucial role in determining whether the project experiences success or shutdowns. It's a unique opportunity that can either improve or harm what a company has built over the years," he said.

The only sure thing is that relationships will change over time. That's why the stakeholder relations group must stay continually focused on making sure these changes are for the better.

Joab Ortiz

Joab is the Public Involvement Project Manager for Burns & McDonnell Engineering in Kansas City, MO. With 16 years of experience, he has led public involvement activities for transportation and transmission line projects throughout the Midwest. Joab specializes in relationship management between government officials, community leaders and special interest groups and the project team. He currently serves on the American Public Works Association, National Government Affairs Committee, and the Board of Directors for the Design-Build Institute of America Mid-America Region.

