MANAGING
PROJECT
COMPLEXITY

The importance of the right of way professional

BY JAMES A. KENT AND GLENN WINFREE, SR/WA

Projects today are increasingly facing disruption from factors that create complexity. This type of complexity is an unintended by-product that diverts corporate energy and resources from construction and implementation in order to address unplanned complications in delivering a project.

Right of way professionals face increasing complexity from the communities that their projects impact. The social risk has become too great to not formally recognize and systematically act upon the underlying causes of how and why citizens go from potentially healthy participation to actively fighting a project. Disruptive forces often overtake and gain control of a project. Because of increasing complexity created by the lack of positive and timely community interface, it is necessary for companies who desire successful projects to rethink how they operate. The challenge is to understand the citizens' world—how they function to protect or expand their environment when faced with changes—and work within that framework.

The Measured Outcomes of Complexity

The outcome of not properly addressing project disruption from citizen resistance is now familiar to project owners. The impacts of such delays are well-summarized in the following findings from Independent Project Analysis.

Independent Project Analysis considers an oil and gas project to be a success if it:

- *Comes in within 25 percent of budget.*

- *Finishes within 25 percent of schedule.*

- *Produces at 80 percent of nameplate within the first two years.*

Consider what that means. For a $4 billion project, 25 percent of budget is $1 billion. One year is 25 percent of schedule, and one year of production deferment is $2 billion. Finally, 20 percent of the first two years of production is another $1 billion deferred.

We are leaving billions of dollars on the table mostly because we do not understand complexity and how to manage it.

An experienced right of way agent is in a key position to positively affect the above outcomes by preventing complexity from even gaining a foothold. What if there were some items in the tool box that could be used up front in the design phase? Tools that would help the land agent recognize and advise management on how to avoid the land mines that await almost every project in today's development environment.

The Right of Way Agent

Here are some actions that the right of way professional can take and feed back to management to ensure that the project does not lead to management complexity. The following selected social risk factors are discussed as an example of what the agent can do within the community:

1. Verify that the project corridor or site development is not near play grounds, schools, senior centers, day care facilities, churches and cemeteries. These areas are held as special places to communities. Any perceived threat to them will create reaction and disruption. The general rule of thumb is that if you are at least 1500 feet away from such vulnerable areas, local people will have a perception of safety. If you are within 500 feet or less, there will be a battle.

2. Are there past project conflicts? If there have been conflicts, are they still ongoing? If resolved, how were they resolved and when? Past conflicts are a reliable indicator of trouble for a new project. If there have been no conflicts, your project is beginning the development process at a low social risk, which allows programming for prevention and resolution of citizen issues. If there is an unresolved conflict still ongoing, your project faces "issue loading" from that disruption and action should be taken to avoid being tied to issues that it has created.

3. As part of their community routine in setting up the project, right of way agents can find the informal gathering places, such as coffee shops, restaurants, barber shops, beauty parlors and bars. It is in these places where information is exchanged face-to-face on a daily basis. Find out if there is talk about your project. If there is none, then there is an opportunity to introduce the project via these valuable word-of-mouth networks, which can eliminate surprise. Listen for victimization talk even if not related to your project. Such talk can spill over.

4. Bulletin boards provide an eye into the heart of the community. If bulletin boards are busy with current issues and activities of the people, you have found an important communication place. Valuable learning about the community and its culture is possible from posted information. These bulletin boards offer insight into what is going on, civic events, contact names, key people, economic stresses and caretaking activities. Such scrappy boards are ones to use as an avenue when the time is right to communicate about the project. Bulletin boards that are neat and well-organized generally reflect the formal groups and their agendas, and they have little value to the project's acceptance into the community.

5. An important warning system is to review the local newspapers and local information sheets to see how controversies are handled or reported. What kinds of controversies have been covered and have they been

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covered impartially? Is there a bias, for example, by ranchers against outsiders and other projects? Is there favor shown to Chamber of Commerce activities? Your Public Affairs department will need to know how to fit the project information into the language of the local area, so technical and company language is replaced to insure understanding.

6. Be conscious of the viewshed (the lines of sight from homes and community pathways) from the corridor location. People value their viewshed and an early indication of this is important, especially if real estate agents have marketed it as part of property value. If viewshed is not a part of the conversation or not marketed in real estate transactions, then there is more opportunity to look at options for corridor location. If viewsheds have intense social attachment, then that attachment needs to be recognized up front so that the project does not get ambushed when it moves forward.

A Seat at the Table

To optimize the integration of the above knowledge into the decision-making system, the right of way agent will need to be ensured a position in the design and development phases of the project. The benefit of this early involvement integrates community interests with management decisions—right from the beginning of the project. By taking this action, management recognizes and understands that the community is an equal partner with other aspects of the project. This establishes a process that allows the company to be perceived as a guest of the community.

The right of way agent brings to the table essential knowledge on how the world is changing with respect to how landowners and communities process information about infrastructure projects. In today's project environment, where timing and sequence are critical to community acceptance, the first chance to gain support is likely to be the only chance to prevent complexity from occurring. The cost of uncontrolled delays and damage to company reputations has become increasingly related to a project's social environment, as noted in the November 2017 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. In an article titled, "It Has Never Been More Important for Big Companies to Listen to Local Communities," the authors point out that a growing number of energy and infrastructure executives agree that successful companies are set apart by their ability to generate social and political support for their projects, not by their technology and expertise.

Rethinking the position of the right of way professional as the first line of community engagement and complexity prevention will be a new idea for many. However, when companies have the right people in place with authority to function internally in the decision-making process, complexity created by community reaction and disruption will become a thing of the past. ✪

Jim Kent has been crafting empowered collaborations among corporations, communities and governments for more than 30 years. He is President of JKA Group and co-developer of IRWA Course 225, Social Ecology: Listening to Community. Visit www.jkagroup.com.

Glenn Winfree, SR/WA is a Land Agent with Duke Energy with over 30 years of real estate experience. He is also the former Chair of the International Electric & Utilities Committee and an active member of the Carolinas Chapter 31.