





SOCIAL RISK SCORING

Evaluating the risk of proposed projects

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Citizen opposition to projects of just about any kind has reached costly proportions with billions of dollars lost each year through project delays or denials. It is time to assess why companies continue to react to project opposition by spending money on conflict rather than on preventing it from occurring in the first place. It would seem reasonable that the money used to fight citizen opposition (which ends up in the hands of lawyers, PR firms and lobbyists) would be better spent on the communities of impact. This shift in strategy would put billions of dollars currently lost to disruption into the hands of right of way agents to work with communities and citizens at the front end of a project. The time has come to think through how to operate a project in a preventive framework, and a major contribution to prevention is to understand social risk and how to use it to accomplish successful citizen and community engagement.

When managing the social risk of right of way projects, there is no shortcut for the value of direct, personal citizen contact. We have written many times in this column about the value of entering the world of citizens to understand how a community functions, how informal networks operate for survival and caretaking, how communication occurs, and how to locate and develop relationships with those individuals held in high esteem by their peers. Working in this fashion provides operating space, increasing the level of authority and resources available to a professional change agent to accomplish their objective. In doing

so, the right of way professional can respond to emerging citizen issues early, reduce the emotional rhetoric that often dominates public venues and find practical solutions to project impacts.

In this article, we want to present a tool for early identification of social risk. We have now offered **Course 225, Social Ecology: Listening to Community** in 10 locations in the U.S. and Canada. We have learned some of the early clues that a proposed project could become disruptive. In today's climate of instant controversy, a proactive capacity to anticipate social risk is even more important.

Below, we present 15 indicators that can reveal social risk before a project is announced. We ask that you try this score card out by considering a current or past project with which you are familiar.



SOCIAL RISK SCORE CARD

Save Money, Save Time, Save the Project!

CATEGORY A:

Information that can be assembled from project data or off-site sources. This information is publicly available from government agencies or from private internet sources.

Indicator #1

Check to see where the project footprint/corridor is in relation to playgrounds, schools, senior centers, cemeteries and other vulnerable areas.

- ☐ a. Within 500 feet or less; High Risk
- ☐ b. Between 500 to 1500 feet; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Beyond 1500 feet; Low Risk

Indicator #2

Check the location of minority populations and their proximity to the project. If the project has been placed in a minority area deliberately to avoid battles elsewhere, the potential for an environmental issue is high.

- ☐ a. Location is near minority populations; High Risk
- ☐ b. Environmental Justice requirements are met; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. There are no minority populations or the impacts on minority populations have been mitigated; Low Risk

Indicator #3

Public lands are highly prized by citizens. Make sure that you avoid public lands if at all possible, especially federal lands because national interest groups will attach their formal anti-development positions to your project.

- ☐ a. Attempt a new route through public lands; High Risk
- ☐ b. Follow a pre-existing corridor through public lands; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Avoid public lands; Low Risk

Indicator #4

Farmers and ranchers describe higher costs and higher value for irrigated lands compared with non-irrigated land. Does your project go through irrigated land?

- ☐ a. Irrigated land is crossed to complete this project; High Risk
- ☐ b. No irrigated land is crossed to complete this project; Low Risk

CATEGORY B:

Information that can be assembled on-site from the local communities.

Indicator #5

Talk to people about past or existing project conflicts. If there have been conflicts, are they still ongoing? If resolved, how were they resolved and when? Existing or past conflicts are a reliable indicator of trouble for a new project.

- ☐ a. Recent conflict still ongoing; High Risk
- ☐ b. Past conflicts are resolved; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. There have been no conflicts; Low Risk

Indicator #6

Visit the gathering places along the route or at the project site, such as coffee shops. What is the talk about in these places?

- ☐ a. Negative talk about your project; High Risk
- ☐ b. Talk is of victimization (even if it's not related to your project); Medium Risk
- ☐ c. There is no talk about your project and no talk about other current negative events; Low Risk

Indicator #7

Check bulletin boards in the communities to see what is posted. These are generally good sources of information.

- ☐ a. If messages about the project are hostile; High Risk
- ☐ b. If your project is posted on the bulletin board, regardless of the message; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. If there is nothing on the bulletin boards about your project; Low Risk

Indicator #8

Review the local newspapers to see how controversy is reported. What kinds of controversies have been covered and have they been covered impartially?

- ☐ a. The newspapers are reporting on your project with either a positive or negative slant; High Risk
- ☐ b. A few articles about other project conflicts but nothing disruptive; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. News articles contain few disruptive conflicts and nothing about your project; Low Risk

Indicator #9

Be conscious of the viewshed (the lines of sight from homes and communities) from the project site or corridor location. People value their viewsheds and an early indication of this is important. Real estate agents are a good source for this information. For instance, do realtors market viewsheds as a part of property sales? If so, is there an economic value as well as a social value?

- ☐ a. Viewsheds have intense social/economic attachment; High Risk
- ☐ b. Viewsheds are recognized but not given much emotional weight; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Viewsheds are not part of the conversation; Low Risk



**CATEGORY C:**

Information about the usual practices of your client/company in generally managing project and corridor definition, as well as land acquisition.

Indicator #10

What is the general approach to land owners in the project area?

- ☐ a. Threaten eminent domain as a first choice; High Risk
- ☐ b. Engage in conversation about the project with no or little involvement of the property owner; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Involve the property owner in resolving their issues; Low Risk

Indicator #11

What is the approach when staging a public meeting?

- ☐ a. Rely only on information produced by the public affairs department or project personnel for the project; High Risk
- ☐ b. Preface a public meeting with a few weeks of effort in creating fact sheets and press releases; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. The team has been doing ongoing community engagement with direct citizen contact for a few months before the first public meeting; Low Risk

Indicator #12

How does the team engage individuals in the community?

- ☐ a. Assume that citizens will understand the project from project presentations and formal documents; High Risk
- ☐ b. Only provide project information to service organizations and other formal groups such as Rotary, Lions and Chamber of Commerce; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Discuss the project at the early stages with informal leaders through their gathering places; Low Risk

Indicator #13

How does the team communicate with individuals in the community?

- ☐ a. Use only formal means of communication or public relations firms to get the word out; High Risk
- ☐ b. Meet only with formal organizations to discuss the project; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Involve project personnel directly with the citizens in discussion about local issues and how to address their issues as part of project operations; Low Risk

Indicator #14

When you discover a community issue that materially affects the project but is beyond your control, how do you respond?

- ☐ a. There is no adequate or timely response and the issue already has a negative impact on the project; High Risk
- ☐ b. The response is delayed to where resolving the issue is more difficult and becomes a problem; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Respond immediately (within 24 hours) to resolve the issue once it is identified; Low Risk

Indicator #15

The right of way agent is the indispensable professional on the ground that can influence project success.
The right of way agent:

- ☐ a. Relates almost exclusively to landowners; High Risk
- ☐ b. Goes beyond landowners and involves stakeholders; Medium Risk
- ☐ c. Understands that the job is to engage with landowners, stakeholders and citizens impacted by the project; Low Risk

SOCIAL RISK SCORE CARD

1. Count the number of Lows, Mediums, Highs
2. Multiply the # of Low ratings by 1
3. Multiply the # of Medium ratings by 2
4. Multiply the # of High ratings by 4
5. Add up all ratings for a total score
6. Use the chart below to determine if your project is/was at Low, Medium, or High Social Risk

Project Score:

SCORE EVALUATION

Risk Category	Total Score	Indicators
Low Risk	20 or Less	Many opportunities to position the project for community benefits. The project has a social license to operate, but management has to be diligent about maintaining that license.
Medium Risk	21-40	Reduced opportunities but options available with company flexibility. This category is the most dynamic with some ability to go down the scale.
High Risk	41-60	Few opportunities; without management changes, disruption will occur. A mid-range score means there is no chance to earn a social license. The project will have to manage in a disruptive environment.

How did your project score? Above we show how we would interpret the score. Send us your score and your feedback to the emails below. Suggestions on additional indicators are welcome, as are your thoughts on the value of a social risk scoring matrix such as this.

If social risk indicators work, they offer the beginnings of a preventive framework for the right of way industry. One of the best models for understanding preventive thinking is the transition of the medical world over the last 40 years. We have moved from high risk care (treating people once they are sick)

to health care (keeping people healthy). Preventive care involves the patient up front in staying healthy thus improving health and reducing cost of disruption caused by illness. The cost savings by preventing illness is measured in the trillions of dollars over that time period.

Some companies and agencies have already recognized the paradigm change in how citizens are responding to infrastructure projects and are re-tooling to be effective in citizen engagement. This type of preventive approach is working for others and it can work for you and your project. ★



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