

Nine Toxic Mistakes that Prolong or Prevent Siting Decision-making

by Jim Lukaszewski

Lukaszewski's First Law of Crisis Survival states that: Neither the media, the public policy-maker, the critic, the disgruntled employee, nor the leaker has the power to disrupt, distort, or destroy your project or goals. Instead, it is usually an uninformed boss, employees acting without instructions, well-meaning friends, or concerned relatives who do this. Put another way, when it comes to siting problems, humiliations, and catastrophes, what Pogo said remains quite true. We do it to ourselves.

Lukaszewski's Law of Siting Success states that: By the time the proposed project is completed the result will look somewhat like what was initially proposed, but less robust and a bit more complex, yet still equal to some useful level of the task as originally envisioned. In other words, at the end of the line, you will have less than you asked for but more than you need to get the job done. The least scientific and often most frustrating elements in siting are forecasting the outcomes of our actions reasonably and pragmatically while reducing the surprise at what ultimately is permitted or approved. Reviewing, directing, and analyzing siting failures, post mortem, provides a lexicon of disastrous behaviors and decisions that are all avoidable, and whose outcomes are all too predictable.

I call them "Toxic Strategies." If you want to succeed, avoid them at all costs.

1 Sneaking in the Back Door

Virtually every week, we read or hear about projects that were originally welcomed into a community quietly and privately by public officials and important local citizens, yet the moment these projects see the light of day and the proposer receives public scrutiny, explosive public reaction torpedoes them. In this age of extraordinary transparency, there is immediate, harsh, often vindictive public punishment for those who operate behind the scenes.

There are three crucial problems with sneaking in the backdoor:

- We threaten the viability of all local public officials with whom we deal. Once the public finds out that public officials failed to inform the community, these officials become suspect.
- Keeping a community out of the loop for reasons that they will never understand has a serious trust-busting impact on public attitudes.
- Once exposed to the public's anger, public officials are forced to take a much harsher positions on projects. Sneaking in the back door is toxic to your relationship with public officials.

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

On Monday, June 23, as part of A&WMA's week-long activities for the 2008 Annual Conference & Exhibition in Portland, OR, Jim Lukaszewski will hold a workshop that will offer a fresh look at corporate reputation pitfalls in the environmental field. Learn more about how the public uses information in the wired world, how the relationship between reporters and activists has changed, and how to manage reputation in a world where a vast amount of information (factual and suspect) is readily available. Lukaszewski will also share a template for information management, including guidelines for when to take a project public and when to directly address the opposition. For more details on this workshop and the many other activities available at this year's Annual Conference, go to www.awma.org/ACE2008.

2 Delusions of Project Support

In almost every project I see, there is an extraordinary emphasis on building public support within a community or within a region. But, who really wants to support a new landfill, quarry, highway, runway, factory, or, heaven forbid, a new big box store? The "supporters" are individuals and organizations with their own agendas and vested interests, personal needs, and expectations. They believe that if they help make the siting a success, they will wind up with jobs, positions of power, and additional community influence.

The proposer may not be aware that many of these supporters have made promises and set expectations for others. These supporters quickly become irritable and even unreliable when it appears that promises cannot be kept and deadlines will not be met. If there are great delays or uncertainties, as there likely will be, these people will become your attackers, irritators, or leakers over the long-term.

Building "support" with these people and groups is toxic to your credibility.

3 Failure to Engage the Community Early

This is the classic question that echoes throughout every siting project, "When do we tell the public anything, especially the truth about what we're up to?" This is a trust issue. Trust is based on advance information, the operative word being *advance*. The fastest and most powerful way to destroy the trust of people and the community is the failure to tell them the truth. The more controversial the decisions, the more quickly the public must be involved and engaged, or a trust vacuum will be formed. Absent crucial information,

this vacuum is filled with fear, anger, and uncertainty. Trust is the absence of fear. Fear is the absence of trust.

Once the public discovers that you have withheld information about adverse circumstances or data, you will immediately and continuously be suspect for withholding other important information. It is infuriating.

Assuming the Public Won't Notice

Many years ago a paper mill plant needed to site a new nontoxic, nonhazardous landfill for paper making waste. Fearful that the community would rise up in anger or fail to understand why the landfill was necessary, the mill manager decided that the best way to handle the situation was to line up all of his facts and then tell the community. The mill manager began a site survey in the county where the paper mill was located and, of course, this included taking soil samples. A half-dozen out-of-state companies, all hired by the paper mill, were running around the county punching holes in farmland and other potential sites, gathering information.

The moment these trucks began setting up drilling rigs, rumors swept the county.

One of the farms selected as a site for soil testing was owned by the father of the local newspaper editor. The father was quite excited that his land might have unexpected additional value. Naturally, the son drove out to the house and talked to the roughnecks who were drilling the samples. They were quite forthright. The reporter contacted the mill manager, who promptly denied that he was responsible for any drilling or anything else going on in the county. Over a period of weeks, the mill manager denied his involvement in this activity three times. During a surprise visit from the editor of the newspaper, who had gotten copies of the drilling company's invoices addressed to the paper mill's owner, the confronted mill manager had to admit his lies. The billing detail clearly cited the reasons for the sample taking.

People do notice. People do remember. People do talk.



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Whine in Public and Ask Irrelevant Questions

The community knows they have you on the run when all you can do is stand up and whine about your situation, and ask questions that no one cares about. Here are some examples:

- Why do people with no real credentials or expertise get credibility from the public, the press, and government?
- Why do we—who have the expertise—have to keep proving ourselves?
- How is it that the more completely we explain things, the facts and data still get used incorrectly...and we get blamed for it?
- Why can't the community see that those who are opposing us have their own agendas and are only acting as fundraisers for their favorite anti-corporate cause?
- Why can't the community agree to the fact that, despite their objections, this is America and we are entitled to a license to operate if we can meet established tests and laws, rules, and public regulations?
- Why do we, who bring jobs, economic development, and the real benefits of American life to your community, get treated so badly? Don't we deserve better than this?

Whiners generally aren't trusted, get laughed at, and make your true friends worry.

Unresponsiveness or Worse Toward Opponents

Most critics or opponents are ignored, first; denigrated and demeaned privately, second; and discredited and labeled as troublemakers or disgruntled, third, until finally the proposer discovers that these critics still remain to be dealt with. The argument goes, "If you answer the critic's and opponent's questions or acknowledge their presence, you're giving them power. If you acknowledge them in any way, you look weak and ineffective. If you allow them to succeed, permit them into your deliberations, or acknowledge any points they might have (even good ones), you're a sissy and you're making it harder for the rest of us, who are tougher, but not the targets at the present time." Most significant movements in history have begun and been guided primarily by one or two highly emotional and completely dedicated people. Two angry neighbors can stop an airport, a skyscraper, and a community from doing something. Unresponsiveness or ignoring detractors only accelerates the production of critics, opponents, and angry people. Many in the community who

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Intel Corp. will buy 1.3 billion kilowatt hours of renewable energy certificates this year, making it the single largest corporate purchaser of green power in the United States, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

TOYOTA Toyota will equip all of its vehicles—hybrid, and nonhybrid, Toyota, Lexus, and Scion—with vehicle efficiency indicators in coming years to alert drivers as to how their driving habits impact fuel efficiency.



Weyerhaeuser Corp. has made the short list for the 2008 Ceres-ACCA Sustainability Reporting Award, designed to highlight best practices in sustainability reporting. This year, 87 entries were submitted; 21 were chosen for the short list.

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might ordinarily not care at all begin to worry and potentially join the opposition.

Those with the most power in any public decision-making process are the victims, the critics, opponents, and the offended. They tend to live forever. They will always be on your case and at your meetings—at the worst possible times.

Pushing Science, Data, Expertise, and the Corporate Pitch, as the Truth

If you have ever been to an angry community or employee meeting, you can recognize, immediately, that the greatest fuel you can add to the fire of human indignation is a pompous, jargon-filled, data-driven, science-bound lecture by an expert. In fact, in these circumstances, rather than understand what is being talked about, the audience becomes angrier and even more outraged. Opposition, concerned about siting, has to do with emotion and perception, almost never with data. Objections may begin with data, but they end in anger, irritation, frustration, feelings of helplessness, and further victimization.

Remember, truth is 15% facts and data, and 85% emotion and perception. Addressing only data creates emotionally explosive circumstances.

8 Sell the Economics of the Project

Many projects seem to be proposed based on “optimal metrics and feasibilities.” Apparently, this approach is meant to impress the neighbors and those adversely affected. However, of course, the reverse is happening. Why should they care if the project makes business sense? Why should they care if the project is acceptable to shareholders? Why should they care if you call yourself a “good neighbor”?

When the pushback starts, if you change one ingredient in your “optimal” proposal, it becomes less than optimal. Every additional change after that degrades the value of the proposal. So you are damned if you propose the perfect project, and you are damned if you give in to building a less than perfect project because you tried to mitigate the community’s anger, fear, and agitation. Whether we are talking about building a new water tower or cell tower, widening a roadway, or replacing a sewer, economic arguments are the stuff of wealthy, powerful people who arrogantly ignore the concerns, pain, and suffering the public is experiencing when it expresses itself through opposition.

Fail to Answer Every Question

The greatest toxicity is created by the intentional failure to answer every question; yes, every question, promptly. Sometimes certain questions are only partially answered, hoping that people won’t notice that some key information was left out. Sometimes it is waiting to answer the questions that should have been a part of your introduction of the project, until someone asks them directly. This often means failing to answer the questions of certain individuals, groups, or factions: school children because they “can’t possibly” understand and “have no standing” to ask questions anyway; and chronic critics in the community because they are “just troublemakers” or “professional agitators”

A&WMA Annual Conference Preview Portland by the Numbers

21st

Nob Hill Avenue referred to as “Restaurant Row”

1 Million

New, used, and rare books at Powell’s City of Books

1947

The year Portland’s own Langlitz Leathers invented the first motorcycle jacket

11,245

Height in feet of Mt. Hood

5100

Acreage of Forest Park, the largest urban wilderness in the United States

THIRTY

Number of breweries in Portland

80,000

Number of microbrew enthusiasts annually attending Portland’s Oregon Brewers Festival

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and don’t have much weight anyway. Other questions are deemed silly, unreasonable, or “fall beneath the threshold of useful information the public needs to have.”

Avoid these nine Toxic Strategies and follow **Lukaszewski’s Five Rules for Siting Success:**

- Rule 1:** Every action, decision, comment, statement, or strategy must reduce the production of critics and victims.
- Rule 2:** Trust is only built by providing crucial information in advance.
- Rule 3:** Say nice things about everyone, all the time, publicly and privately.
- Rule 4:** Answer all the questions at the earliest possible time, preferably before they even get asked.
- Rule 5:** Be positive and eradicate the use of negative words and language; be constructive, avoid criticism, and suggest useful alternatives—before the critics do. Act quickly. Hesitation, delay, timidity, and confusion are the ingredients of defeat.

It’s your destiny. If you fail to manage it, someone else is standing by to do it for you. **em**