REMEMBERING THE COMMUNITY IN COMMUNITY OUTREACH: WHY LANCOOL IS COOL!

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Abstract. When the Gwinnett County Department of Public Utilities (DPU) undertook several, major inter-related water system expansion projects, the staff knew community outreach would be critical to its success. The plan would be a living, working document that could change as the situation warranted. By developing a strategic communications plan before construction began, DPU achieved a level of support and trust in the affected community that helped it balance the public's interests with its role as a service provider through with more than three years of construction.

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks as the specific communication/ public outreach efforts of one Georgia utility, the Gwinnett County Department of Public Utility (DPU). DPU embraced this proactive public affairs approach for managing a major water infrastructure construction project involving an active community, multiple consulting engineering firms and contractors, and a lake popular with recreational users from around the state.

The paper examines the process used to develop the strategic Communications Plan and follows it through the challenges, successes, and lessons learned that carried DPU to the end of major construction. It also explains what LANCOOL means and how it became the cornerstone of the communications program. Components of the program included:

- website
- briefing packets for officials
- community meetings
- press kits
- fact sheets
- 24-hour resident hotline
- monthly updates
- media and crisis training
- multimedia pieces

Utility directors and staff, as well as other water resource management professionals, should take away a valuable lesson from this paper, specifically that relating technical and/or scientific information to the general public does not have to be overwhelming or intimidating. With careful planning and execution the public can become an ally, instead of a foe, whether it's a major construction project, a simple pipeline installation, watershed management, or a public education program.

GWINNETT COUNTY BACKGROUND

Situated about 30 miles northeast of Atlanta, Gwinnett County experienced tremendous growth in the last 20 years. In the 1990s, County leaders recognized the need to meet the increasing demands on water and wastewater service for a growing population plan. To this end, they developed a 50-year Water and Sewer Master Plan. Updated every few years, by the late 1990s it identified the need for an additional water intake and treatment plant. A cross-section of community leaders and residents offered their input into the Master Plan and were among those who understood that one intake and one treatment plant coupled with a growing population just didn't add up. On top of this, the existing Lanier Filter Plant had no room to expand and increase the County's capacity. Expanding the water system with a new plant was the only way Gwinnett could keep pace with its citizens' water needs.

By 2001, with all the bidding and design work complete, DPU was ready to begin construction on the County's new treatment plant, new intake and pump station, and multiple water lines that would connect these components with each other, the existing water treatment plant, and the distribution system. Because of geography, all of the construction would be concentrated in a small area of the county. Gwinnett relies on Lake Lanier for its water supply but only has access to three miles of shoreline. DPU staff realized public outreach would be a critical component of the building process.

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Before construction even began, DPU staff knew it would need assistance with the community outreach effort. Environmental engineering firm Brown and

Caldwell (BC) offered communications professionals who would help the staff draft and implement its Communications Plan for the water system expansion. The key to making it successful would be determining the stakeholders, issues, and challenges specific to the project and to the community. This required brainstorming sessions between DPU and BC. These sessions pulled upon the years of experience of the various team members and also generated new ideas on what to share with the community around Lake Lanier and how it should be done.

The Plan itself was a flexible, written document guiding the communications process. It listed the stakeholders and issues, how information would be conveyed, who would speak on behalf of DPU, and the primary messages DPU wanted the public to understand. It could also be revised as issues and stakeholders evolved.

LANCOOL

To bring all these elements together in one unified project theme, the team developed the acronym LANCOOL, which stands for Lanier Community Outreach and Liaison. This became an easy name for the community to remember and a way to provide consistency to all the communications about the various construction projects. LANCOOL was incorporated into a project logo that also included the tag line *Reliable Water: Today and Tomorrow*. This helped promote one of the primary messages behind the construction projects that the new treatment plant was being built to give the County redundant capacity and supply a back-up in case of failure at the Lanier Plant.

Stakeholders and issues. In drafting the plan, BC helped DPU pinpoint the stakeholders. Community groups, such as the Lake Lanier Association and Save Our Communities Now, were recognized as important audiences. Churches, schools, media outlets, elected and appointed officials were also included on the list. Additionally, business and residents along pipeline routes or in the vicinity of the new plant site were compiled into a database with the other stakeholders.

Some of the issues surrounding the LANCOOL projects were similar to what other large construction projects face – easement acquisition, blasting, road closures, construction noise. During the brainstorming sessions, the team also realized some issues that were unique to the community. The people living around Lake Lanier were typically affluent, well-educated, and more likely to be involved in community issues. Lake Lanier is a popular destination across the state and some of the construction would affect access to it. Some of the neighbors to the new plant site were already displeased with a nearby landfill that was outside of the County's jurisdiction. Even the very scope of the project created complications. The individual contractors would only be concerned with their particular aspect of the water system expansion – new plant, new intake and pump station, multiple water lines – yet the communications about each of these pieces had to be coherent, cohesive, and consistent with the LANCOOL identity and messages.

Message distribution. Once the primary message of LANCOOL was developed (a redundant water source), the communications team tackled some of the specific issues outlined in the Communications Plan. Fact sheets explaining the entire scope of the LANCOOL projects, the new water treatment plant, blasting activity, and easement acquisition were drafted. These fact sheets were distributed at LANCOOL community meetings and were placed in briefing packets for elected officials and in media kits. Maps of the area were included in the briefing packets and media kits as well. Elected officials also received talking points to help them speak knowledgeably to their constituents on the subject while reinforcing LANCOOL's primary message. As part of the Plan DPU staff and other team members underwent media and crisis communications training.

In addition to the fact sheets, briefing packets, and media kits, the Communications Plan also provided school curriculum on water that met state standards and a special phone number known as the "water line" where concerned residents could speak directly to project managers about their concerns. All of these elements supported what became the three pillars of LANCOOL's Communications Plan: community meetings, a monthly newsletter, and a website.

Community meetings. Construction on the new water plant began in July 2001, but the first community meetings were held in May of that year. Approximately 85 residents attended. The meetings followed an open house structure to allow attendees to speak directly to project managers and contractors and voice their specific concerns. The open house format gave people the freedom to attend at a time convenient to them. By foregoing a formal structure, the group dynamic where people tend to band together around a certain issue (in any type of meeting) was severely limited. Project managers and contractors staffed several information boards showing the plans for each of the LANCOOL projects. Sign-up sheets captured the names of those attending, which could be cross-referenced or added to the stakeholder database. It also gave residents the opportunity to sign up for the LANCOOL newsletter. Summaries of the meetings were then posted to the website for anyone to access.

After the initial series of meetings, community meetings were scheduled approximately once a quarter throughout the three-plus years of construction.

Newsletter. Once construction began, a monthly newsletter was established compiling updates on the individual construction projects. This kept residents informed from the very beginning of construction until the formal dedication of the water plant in October 2004. Construction photographs helped readers see the individual projects take shape. The newsletter also highlighted the contractors' safety records and provided information about the website, the "water line," and upcoming events. Subscribers had the option of receiving it via mail or e-mail. Throughout the project, approximately 150 people were signed up to receive the newsletter.

Website. The website became the central repository of all LANCOOL communications. Information about who the contractors were, who the project managers were, the fact sheets, the monthly newsletters, and community meeting summaries were posted to the website www.lancool.com. The site was informative, eye-catching and easy to navigate. Because of the area's demographics, it was well-received and well-used by the community. Not only did it serve as a clearinghouse for the other communications methods in the Plan, it also included its own features that enhanced LANCOOL's credibility. An online feedback form let concerned residents contact project managers directly. To ensure that messages received a response, a copy of the query was also sent to BC. This form helped to create a two-way dialogue between community members and the project managers that was bolstered through the community meetings and the "water line." Another innovative item on the website gave residents timely information on construction activity, blastings, and road closures. A calendar page listed all these activities and when they would occur. Project managers input the information directly into the calendar through a password protected form to make sure it was as accurate and up-to-date as possible. As residents grew familiar with the LANCOOL communications, they came to rely on this feature more and more. The website also became a place to put short pieces of information about items of interest, such as road closings or community meetings that would be coming up in the near future, through a pop-up window on the main page.

The opening page of the website, which served as a repository of LANCOOL numerous communications efforts.

Other communications. One of the results of trying to reach people through different channels is that the project managers built personal relationships with some of the neighbors. For example, the project manager overseeing the plant construction made sure to call one woman with an autistic son before blasting. She took him away from her home each time and returned when the project manager called when the blasting was complete. This was the kind of extra measures the staff took to keep the community as happy as possible during construction.

For many years prior to the construction, the Lanier Filter Plant held an annual open house in conjunction with National Drinking Water Week. This provided another opportunity for staff to talk to the community about LANCOOL. It also helped people see how the new plant would operate.

At the 2004 Open House, a multimedia CD was handed out showing two fifth-graders taking a tour of the Lanier Plant. This helped educate children and their parents in a fun way about the process and cost of treating water.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

As part of the Communications Plan, DPU staff underwent media and crisis communications training. During these sessions, the staff was given tips on speaking to the media and how to promote key messages on LANCOOL. Role-playing through real-life scenarios helped the staff formulate their responses to the community and the media in case an emergency did arise around the LANCOOL projects. Training took place in mid 2001 with a refresher course in the first quarter of 2003. DPU staff was put to the test in November of 2003 when a fatal accident occurred during a pipeline installation.

On November 10, 2003, two welders with a subcontractor were inside a 72-inch pipeline. An explosion occurred at approximately 7:30 a.m. The two men were severely burned but managed to get out of the pipeline. It happened in the middle of a neighborhood street, which brought out many people as well as the news media. The project manager, remembering the training, also rushed to the scene.

Even though the media was reporting on the accident, it was important for DPU to respond because the community was accustomed to receiving information from them on a regular basis through LANCOOL. This became DPU's vehicle to explain what they were doing about the accident. There were some complicating factors: the location of the accident in a residential neighborhood, which delayed the pipeline installation further inconveniencing the residents and the nearby landfill, outside the County's jurisdiction, which led to speculation about the cause of the accident.

Within hours, an update was posted to the website. Because this was a one-time incident, the media's coverage ended after the event, making it even more imperative that DPU continue to target the neighborhood. The web message was revised as the situation changed and the two workers died. Five days after the accident, a special letter from DPU was delivered to homeowners in the neighborhood. It mentioned the utility's concern for the families of the two workers, stated that it could not speculate on a cause, outlined actions it was taking in regard to ongoing investigations by the County and OSHA, and recognized the inconvenience neighbors were facing with a stalled pipeline installation in the middle of their street. Two weeks after the accident, the project manager spoke to the neighbors directly via a streaming video on the website. She made many of the same points that were in the letter, but because many of the neighbors knew her from the project site, this helped to humanize the utility during the crisis.

During this time, the majority of the calls and comments DPU received were about the status of the two men, not about the delay in the project. Because the utility had already established itself as being accessible and credible through LANCOOL, they had built a store of goodwill in the community that helped them successfully navigate the aftermath of the accident.

CONSTRUCTION COMPLETION

By the fall of 2004, most of the construction on the LANCOOL projects was wrapping up. Because the community had lived through more than three years of construction and had been part of the process throughout LANCOOL, DPU staff wanted to include them on the projects' completion.

In late October of that year, DPU held an Open House at the newly christened Shoal Creek Filter Plant. A formal dedication for state and county leaders, contractors, and consultants was held a few days prior to the community event. The staff hoped to draw people from all across the county to see the new plant.

The Open House was promoted through the website, the monthly newsletter, through a press release and newspaper ads. Many of the neighbors who were regulars at the community meetings attended as well as some people who just wanted to see what the County had built. In addition to kids' activities, refreshments, information stations, and giveaways, those who came out were treated to tours of the plant and pump station.

For the County and DPU, it was the successful culmination of more than three years of construction. During that time there were some complaints from the community, but not at the level DPU anticipated. The director for DPU acknowledges that by being proactive in their public involvement activities, BC helped Gwinnett County effectively manage customer expectations and concerns relating to these major water distribution system construction projects. LANCOOL also achieved a 2004 Honor Award from the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC – Georgia).

SUMMARY

For professionals used to thinking and relating in technical terms, public outreach can seem a daunting task no matter what the size of the project. What LANCOOL demonstrates is that it doesn't have to be. The concept of strategically planning your communications before you begin a project, taking a proactive not a reactive stance, can easily be tailored to watershed management, regional water resources planning, or any kind of infrastructure project. The key is remembering the community. Invite them to learn more about the project; after all the projects and planning are for their benefit. By including the community in the beginning, an agency can gain trust, support, and goodwill – many of the characteristics needed to take a project from design to completion.