

Maintaining Good Community Relations During Construction

You are soundly sleeping in your home, and all of a sudden the sounds of heavy equipment, back-up beepers and jack hammers shatter your peaceful, early morning slumber. A major pipeline is being constructed right down your street and you didn't know about it. And you're mad. At 8 a.m., you begin calling the office of city council members and county supervisors representing your area. Your frustration grows as staff members claim they know nothing and bounce you to the public works "black hole." When you open your garage door, your driveway is blocked. Surprised, mad, and now late for work. Someone will hear about this and it won't be pretty.

As you can see from this hypothetical situation, it's easy for infrastructure projects to get off on the wrong foot in the public's view. Goodwill gained during a project's approval process can evaporate quickly once the nuisances of construction set in. If community frustrations are not addressed promptly during all stages of a construction project, complaints from nearby residents and businesses will filter up to elected officials or the media, creating a negative perception of the organization and the project.

Nurturing relationships with the community during construction will minimize complaints and may even prevent lawsuits, which have the potential to cause schedule delays and cost overruns. Use the following tips to help smooth the way for construction projects in populated areas:

Plan Ahead

The time to plan for community relations is before construction begins. Look at the entire work schedule and anticipate potential community impacts, such as traffic detouring, road closures, impacts to bus routes, school crossings, emergency vehicles, dust, bright lights at night and noise. If these impacts cannot be avoided, give the community plenty of notice so they can better prepare for a temporary change in routine.

The owner and construction management team should also use this time to build a relationship with the contractors through pre-construction meetings, partnering sessions, progress meetings and ongoing discussions. Make the point up front with contractors that you need their help to be a good neighbor throughout the project, and it's in their best interest to make sure we keep the community happy. You may even want to include guidelines in the contract specifications detailing your community relations expectations of the contractor. Projects often last for several months or years, so it is important to work effectively together.

Be Accessible

Be an ambassador for the community, acting quickly to address community inquiries and complaints. Establish a central phone number community members can call to express concerns and ask questions about the project. Staff answering phones should be empathetic, familiar with the project and return calls quickly with the information needed. Keep a record of who called and the plan of action. Make sure to follow up!

Be Open to Accommodation

Offering free car washes, pool cleaning or window cleaning to residents might seem extravagant. However, compared to the total project budget, these small gestures are a small price to pay for a smooth construction process. Be creative and put yourself in the shoes of local residents.

Going to make a lot of noise into the evening? Offer gift certificates to the local movie theater so residents can take a break. Or, buy white noise machines and air filters for nearby houses. These thoughtful acts will more than pay for themselves in the end.

Explain the Project

Too often, this important step is skipped when communicating about a construction project. Tell the public what the project is, why it is important and how it will benefit them. Let residents know when the project has advanced to a new stage of construction and what type of impacts they should expect.

This will minimize inquiries and complaints. Determine the best way to get these messages to the affected communities, such as e-mail, direct mail, signage, door hangers, telephone calls, open house meetings or a combination of these approaches, but remember to let them know in advance, during and even after the project is completed. Saying “thank you” to those that have been inconvenienced can go a long way.

Get the Community Involved

When community members have a say in project decisions, they are more likely to support the project. Seek feedback from the community before the construction begins, during construction and soon after construction has been completed. Project opponents have been known to become project supporters as a result of their participation in outreach efforts. Even vocal opponents near the construction area may end up praising the project team for its efforts to communicate openly and work with the community to minimize impacts.

Taking a community into consideration from start to finish will help to establish trust and maintain positive perceptions of the owner, construction management team, contractor and the project. The result will be a project completed on time and within budget and the project team can feel proud of its accomplishments.

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