

# BRISBANE WATER ENVIRO ALLIANCE

The Brisbane Water Enviro Alliance (BWEA) was formed by Brisbane City Council in 2003 to design and construct a \$187 million upgrade to three Brisbane wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) over a three-year period from January 2003 to March 2006.

From the outset, effective and ongoing public participation was a major and necessary focus of the Alliance, as a number of pre-existing issues threatened to erode public support, generating negative publicity and neighbour protest about the treatment plant upgrades.

MarCom Communication was sub-contracted as part of BWEA's management team to ensure successful public participation and the best possible outcome for this high priority Council project.

## Challenges and Problems

BWEA wanted to create an ongoing legacy that would both establish Council as a leader in public participation and change negative public perception about WWTPs.

Challenges were presented by the fact that:

- the plants were surrounded by residential properties which, for many years, had been subjected to odour impact
- in many cases neighbours had been unaware of the existence of the plants until after purchasing their properties, moving in and experiencing regular odour incidents
- when coupled with concerns about the environmental impacts of discharge from the plants, public opinion was overwhelmingly negative.

Negative opinion was so strong that in the initial stages of the project BWEA was met with residents wearing gas masks, demanding the plants be shut down.



Residents line up to visit the new plant



CRG Members on a tour of the Sandgate plant



Oxley Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant



Sandgate Wastewater Treatment Plant

## Public Participation Strategy and Method

Despite this strong opposition, closing the plants was not an option, so solving the issues was a must and this could not be done without community participation at a level beyond protest.

BWEA recognised the need to:

- allow those most affected to have a say in the decision-making process
- to take the community on a journey with the project to demonstrate its genuine commitment to achieving exceptional outcomes for their benefit.

Public Participation methods included:

- **Community Representative Group (CRG)** to present detailed engineering information - most wastewater projects only gloss over this information assuming the community will not understand
- **site tours** to show odour sources and explain what could be done
- **atmospheric scientist presentations** to explain odour modelling and dispel myths of hydrogen sulphide poisoning
- **regular meetings with key opinion leaders** to discuss issues and project progress
- **financial key performance indicators (KPIs)** set on gaining plant neighbour satisfaction to focus BWEA on the importance of the community
- **construction disruption information** - notified in advance resulting in a total of only nine complaints over the three year project.

## Results

These methods and resulting community input led directly to the decision to make odour elimination a core focus of the project, with attached financial KPIs. This:

- **gave residents faith in the public participation process** – neighbour support for the upgrades improved from a negative rating of “2” in 2003 to an extremely positive rating of “4.5” out of a possible “5” in 2006
- **demonstrated Council’s commitment to obtaining genuine community “involvement”**, CRG satisfaction with input opportunities was rated as “4.2” out of a possible “5” in 2006
- **showed the exceptional outcomes the community can expect from being involved in public participation projects.**