

Dealing with Road-Rage - through sound Community Engagement Processes

Case study - Highway realignment through a small country town

1 Introduction

The Williams township is located about 2hrs south-east of Perth, almost halfway between Perth and Albany and is frequently used by passing traffic as a major rest stop.

The two bridges into and out of town are in need of replacement. Recent repairs are envisaged to extend the effective life of the bridges until 2011. Traffic volume is increasing at 2.3% per annum and is predicted to see a 200% increase in freight volumes along this route within the next 20 years.

The bridge replacement also provided an opportunity to consider alternative routes for the highway, either through or around the town. Three initial options were identified by Mainroads staff, based on desktop studies. They wanted community guidance to help identify the preferred option.

2 Design of the engagement process

2.1 Specific objectives of the engagement process

In designing the engagement process the project team utilised the 'Public Participation Spectrum' designed by IAP2. The process focused on the 'Consult', and 'Involve' stages of the spectrum.

Working in the 'Consult' stage was intended to obtain stakeholder feedback on the alternatives or options available to the project team. Working in the 'Involve' stage was intended to ensure stakeholder concerns are understood and considered during the decision-making process.

2.2 Who's who

We needed to know who was who in the community and give some thought to how they may be affected by the project. The main groupings are shown below.

Stakeholder grouping	Interests
Local businesses located on highway	Largely reliant on passing traffic for their trade
Parents	Large traffic volumes moving through town. Potential traffic risk for kids
Local residents	Noise from large traffic volumes. Limited parking
Users of the recreation reserve	Have to cross highway to get to recreation reserve
Transport drivers	Need main traffic route maintained.

Understanding this helped to ensure we had information on hand to address their interests and concerns.

2.3 Getting involvement

Local business people had invested heavily and were very reliant on passing traffic for their trade. It was important that they had a clear understanding of the project and the alternatives being proposed by Main Roads. They were seen as a very influential group in the project. The Main Roads Customer Service Officer contacted all local businesses via post, phone and in person (where requested) to explain the project.

A community workshop was held in March 2008 at the Williams town hall as part of the community engagement process. The workshop was designed to gain broader community input to assist Main Roads WA (MRWA) to identify the preferred bridge replacement option and associated road realignment. The information generated from the workshop will be used to assist the Reference Group in making the final decision regarding the preferred road alignment and bridge locations for the project.

Members of the public who were unable to attend were able to submit comments to the project team via a number of avenues including an online survey. Stakeholders were also invited to join the project database in order to receive future updates about the project. The project team intends to maintain the engagement process through the use of electronic newsletters, the MRWA website and briefings to community groups and organisations.

The workshop was well promoted through direct approaches to local business people, advertising in the local newspaper and promotion through the local government and a direct mail out. The promotion was highly successful, with over 56 local townspeople attending the workshop.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Inform Williams residents and business operators of options identified and possible timeframes for project
- Seek input to help identify the priority option for the replacement of the Williams townsite bridges & road alignment

3 Workshop process

The workshop was split into the following sections:

- Review of displays, and discussion of issues with main road staff
- Formal presentation from MRWA Regional Manager
- Question and answer session
- Facilitated workshop sessions to identify preferred route
- Workshop summary and close

3.1 Review of displays, and discussion of issues with Main Roads staff

Prior to the formal commencement of the workshop participants had the opportunity to come in and view displays and discuss any aspect of the proposed project with MRWA technical staff that were in attendance. Many of the participants also took this opportunity to discuss the project with each other. Several commented afterwards, that this was highly valuable, enabling them to better understand the views of other townspeople regarding the different options. For

others, it enabled many of their initial concerns to be dealt with and for their stress levels to be reduced.

3.2 Formal presentation from Mainroads Regional Manager

The three route alignment options were presented and discussed during the workshop.

Importantly, participants had the opportunity to look at these options *before* the workshop, and the majority were supplied with an information package beforehand.

The presentation outlined the purpose of the project and the need for action, given the finite life of the current bridges. It highlighted the limited future ability of the bridges to carry increasingly heavy traffic loads.

3.3 Question and answer session

Participants were seated at nine different tables. They were split up randomly, to ensure a greater diversity and discussion of views. Following the formal presentation, participants at each table were asked to discuss their thoughts on the presentation and agree on *one question* to ask the presenter.

This process enabled all participants present to discuss their thoughts and concerns with others at the workshop, and still have their questions answered. Importantly, the process ensured that no one person dominated the proceedings, and that everyone had a chance to be involved. This was one of the *keys of to the success* of the evening.

3.4 Workshop session

Each of the nine participant tables were then asked to review each of the three initial options. In each case, they identified the strengths and weaknesses of each option. They also made suggestions for changes to each option. They were supplied with large aerial photos, which mapped out the route of each option.

After a break for supper, participants were able to review the strengths and weaknesses and suggested changes for all options as identified by each of the nine working groups (tables). Participants then undertook a prioritisation process to identify their preferred option. Each participant was given six stick-on dots, which they could allocate in any way, across all of the three options. This process provides a highly visual, equitable and efficient way of prioritisation.

4 Results

The prioritisation revealed the following preferences:

- Option A: 69 votes
- Option B: 240 votes
- Option C: 27 votes

Main roads will now work with the Shire of Williams, to establish a Reference Group that will further develop the project from hereon. It is intended that the reference group will consist of representatives from Mainroads, the Shire of Williams, local community representatives and business representatives.

Contact on the project will be maintained through electronic newsletters, and through the Shire of Williams.

5 Reflections

- Participants enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to discuss each others' views and have their views heard
- Participants found the process valuable, especially its participative approach to restrain the traditionally dominant characters in the community
- Much of the information exchange was anticipated to be between MRWA staff and community members. In fact, most discussion was between community members
- The review of displays before the 'meeting' helped ease much tension
- Requiring tables to have only 'one agreed question' reduced the potential for soapbox syndrome setting in early
- The break for supper enabled further exchange of views (and enabled us to collate results from the prioritisation process)
- The 'decision' was seen as acceptable as it was based on an open process

More information

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