



## Public Consultations for the City of Selkirk Water Supply

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### ABSTRACT

The City of Selkirk water supply had been in a challenging situation for over 50 years. When the City converted the original groundwater supply to a surface water source, public opposition and resistance forced a return to their existing groundwater supply. The drawdown cone around the existing wells had developed to the point where only a few meters of available drawdown remained. A major change was required.

The Manitoba Government, through extensive test drilling, located a new proposed well-field location approximately 8 km from the City in a neighboring rural municipality. The City had attempted several times to develop the water supply at the new proposed location, only to find intense public opposition and misguided claims of ownership over the aquifer. As a result, the project was suspended on each occasion, despite the increasingly critical need within the City of Selkirk.

An innovative approach to consultations was employed. Instead of simply hosting the traditional open house, a strategic approach to engaging stakeholders was prepared. Stakeholders were identified on the basis of potential impact: stakeholders that were most likely to perceive a possible direct impact by the project were addressed individually and in advance of other stakeholders. Small group sessions and individual meetings were held to create a complete understanding of the project and any related concerns. Other stakeholders were subsequently addressed through other specific consultation mechanisms. The consultation process included meetings before, during and after field work/study, in an integrated manner, rather than as a component of the process. Fieldwork was not undertaken until the complete context was delivered to the stakeholders and all concerns addressed to the extent available at each stage of the project. As a result of this innovative approach, all previous opposition was removed from the licensing process, leading to a highly successful, implementable project.

L'approvisionnement en eau de la ville de Selkirk était dans une situation difficile depuis plus de 50 ans. Lorsque la Ville a converti l'approvisionnement initial en eau souterraine en une source d'eau de surface, l'opposition publique et la résistance ont obligé un retour à leur approvisionnement en eau souterraine existante. Le cône de retrait autour des puits existants s'est développé au point où il ne restait que quelques mètres de déchargement disponible. Un changement majeur était nécessaire.

Le gouvernement du Manitoba, par le biais d'un forage approfondi, a localisé un nouveau lieu de terrain proposé à environ 8 km de la ville dans une municipalité rurale voisine. La Ville a tenté plusieurs fois de développer l'approvisionnement en eau dans le nouveau lieu proposé, seulement pour trouver une opposition publique intense et des revendications de propriété erronées sur l'aquifère. En conséquence, le projet a été suspendu à chaque occasion, malgré le besoin de plus en plus critique au sein de la ville de Selkirk.

Une approche innovante des consultations a été utilisée. Plutôt que de simplement organiser la maison ouverte traditionnelle, une approche stratégique pour engager les parties prenantes a été préparée. Les parties prenantes ont été identifiées sur la base d'un impact potentiel: les parties prenantes les plus susceptibles de percevoir un impact direct possible par le projet ont été traitées individuellement et en avance sur d'autres parties prenantes. Des séances de petits groupes et des réunions individuelles ont été organisées pour créer une compréhension complète du projet et toutes les préoccupations connexes. Les autres parties prenantes ont ensuite été traitées par d'autres mécanismes de consultation spécifiques. Le processus de consultation comprenait des réunions avant, pendant et après le travail sur le terrain / l'étude, de manière intégrée, plutôt que comme une composante du processus. Le travail de terrain n'a été entrepris que lorsque le contexte complet a été transmis aux parties prenantes et toutes les préoccupations adressées dans la mesure disponible à chaque étape du projet. À la suite de cette approche innovante, toute opposition précédente a été retirée du processus d'octroi de licences, ce qui a mené à un projet hautement performant et réalisable.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Infrastructure projects involving a large number of potential project stakeholders or competing and controversial perspectives, can be difficult to manage from a public engagement perspective. Challenges lie with identifying, notifying, involving and managing individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups in effective and appropriate ways to suit a diversity of interest types or interest levels (Hertog et al. 2008).

Project managers also face the challenge of ensuring consistency and continuity in communications during “multi-round” or longer-term public engagement projects, as well as justifying the selected means and methods of notifying and involving stakeholders.

While much has been written about public engagement mechanisms and approaches, relatively little has been written about effective *management* of public engagement programs. Without effective program management and a specific engagement strategy, even the best intended engagement efforts may result in a poor project outcome. Where a project requires an environmental license or a municipal approval, a “poor project outcome” may in fact mean no project at all in the case that a license or approval is not granted.

This article highlights the use of a public engagement technique, the Stakeholder Tier System (Toews 2013), that assisted in the acquisition of an environmental license for a new water supply for the City of Selkirk, Manitoba, a controversial project that had previously failed to reach licensing stage due to public controversy and concerns from potentially affected citizens.

The significant underlying premise for the Stakeholder Tier System is that for any given project (particularly infrastructure-based projects), there will be a variety of *types* of stakeholders, a variety of *interest areas* among stakeholders, and varying levels of *potential impact* on stakeholders. The Stakeholder Tier System provides a framework for identifying, sorting, and managing individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups in a manner that recognizes the potential for some stakeholders to be more greatly impacted than others, rather than simply relying on a simple “broadcast approach” to public engagement. Many stakeholder engagement approaches do not recognize these differences sufficiently, opting rather for an approach that either underestimates stakeholder perspectives, or erringly rationalizes stakeholder perspectives as irrelevant, insignificant or homogenous.

## 2 PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

### 2.1 Challenges with public infrastructure projects

Public infrastructure projects present a unique type of project from a public engagement process design perspective:

- They typically have either a significant land requirement or may involve a large publicly held resource (e.g. aquifer) that relates to land that may or may not be privately held.
- They are likely to have a significant number and variety of stakeholder interests, particularly in the case of large linear infrastructure projects such as highways or transmission corridors, which may cross many private land parcels, a variety of geographic terrain, and a variety of jurisdictions along the project length.
- They are often subject to specific scrutiny because they normally require some form of licensing or approval, and therefore typically are required by authorities to have included effective public engagement processes (in this case Section 12(5) of The Environment Act (Manitoba)).
- Certain publicly funded infrastructure projects may have the added dimension of normative public thinking that poses such questions as “should the project be undertaken” and if so, “how should it be undertaken”.
- They may be affected by official or unofficial political agendas, which can have the effect of creating skepticism among “non-political” participants about the sincerity of the engagement effort (Diduck et al. 2002).

Cotton and Devine-Wright (2012) note: “Given the often publicly controversial nature of infrastructure siting, success is dependent upon generating support (or at least ameliorating opposition) from local communities, public planning bodies, the regulator...and numerous stakeholder groups”. For these reasons, it is important that project proponents give careful consideration as to how public engagement processes are established and carried out for these kinds of projects, in order to reduce the risk of project failure.

### 2.2 Engagement challenges with public infrastructure projects

Designing, executing and reporting on public engagement processes for public infrastructure projects poses specific public engagement process design challenges that follow on the unique project traits outlined in the preceding section.

- Stakeholder Equity. Stakeholders almost always have varied interests, both in terms of subject matter (interest type) and degree of interest (interest level). Stakeholders directly impacted by a project may feel they deserve a higher level of consultation than those who are only indirectly

affected, or have a peripheral interest. The organization approach should therefore be designed to accommodate varied interest types and levels.

- Organization. Because there are often many stakeholders of many types associated with public infrastructure projects, a method of organizing and tracking stakeholder information is critical. A cohesive and sensible approach is required to ensure no single stakeholder is 'lost' during a lengthy and/or complex project. Project managers can fail to 'find' all the right stakeholders without a standard approach to stakeholder organization.
- Transparency. Public infrastructure projects that are associated with a specific public sector proponent, and may also have ties to a large private sector partner. Such entities can be particularly cautious with respect to public review of project details. For this reason transparency is paramount, since a participant's suspicion of a lack of transparency is likely to lead to project controversy.
- Accountability. Public infrastructure projects most often are subject to public scrutiny through either a licensing approval process or a public hearing process. A stakeholder organization system can contribute to the ability to "re-count the story" of how the project proponent communicated with stakeholders. Demonstrating that an appropriate, thorough, and responsive engagement process has taken place, can be a powerful asset in the circumstance where project opposition has not been satisfied previously.

### 3 STAKEHOLDER TIER SYSTEM

#### 3.1 Objective

The Stakeholder Tier System can be uniquely designed and applied to suit an individual project. The main objective is to identify stakeholders, sort them into tiers based on established criteria, and then communicate with each tier in a way that suits the anticipated needs of participants within each tier.

#### 3.2 Process

The following steps describe a process for using the Stakeholder Tier System for a public infrastructure project. This method is best carried out in a multi-disciplinary team setting, since members of a project team will offer a variety of perspectives. This approach should result in better identification of diverse interests, and the establishment of suitable tier criteria.

- Undertake a stakeholder scan to identify types of interests. Typical interest groupings for public infrastructure projects might include landowners, jurisdictional authorities, businesses, advocacy groups, special interest groups, and the general public among others.

- Describe the likely nature, range and depth of the interests of each type of stakeholder identified. For example, a landowner whose existing well may be impacted (or who fears potential impact) is likely to be very interested in the project, and may be directly impacted in ways that a rate-payer serviced by a municipal water supply will not. Similarly, a special advocacy group may express a high level of interest in a project, however the potential level of direct or indirect impact to the group may be very low. While the type and level of each stakeholder interest is important and valuable, they may need to (or wish to) be addressed in different ways.
- Prepare criteria by which to sort stakeholder interests into tiers, based on the likely potential level of impact stakeholders may encounter. This is an important step because the criteria must create unique groupings of stakeholders, and the criteria will guide how each stakeholder type is notified and subsequently involved in the public engagement process. While all potential stakeholders must be notified and consulted, the greater the likelihood that a stakeholder is going to be directly affected, the greater the effort to notify and consult should be.
- Determine how best to notify and communicate with each tier, when to communicate with them. Notwithstanding a differing approach to different stakeholder types, all project information shared with one stakeholder should be available to all stakeholders.
- Execute the public engagement plan.
- As stakeholder input is received, record it on a tier basis. This is important as responses may differ by tier. For example, Tier 1 stakeholders may be very upset with certain aspects of the project, while Tier 3 stakeholders may be very pleased. Making this distinction can help ensure concerns are clearly reported and/or addressed as part of project decision-making.
- Adjust the public engagement plan as required. Projects should evolve if the public engagement process is, in fact, having an impact on project decision-making.
- Adjust stakeholders from one tier to another as requested or required. The Tier System is primarily an organization tool - if a stakeholder wants to be communicated with in an alternate manner, they should be accommodated to the greatest degree practicable.

### 4 CITY OF SELKIRK WATER SUPPLY

#### 4.1 Background

The City of Selkirk water supply had been in a challenging situation for over 50 years. When the City converted the original groundwater supply to a surface water source, public opposition and resistance forced a return to their existing groundwater supply. The drawdown cone around the existing wells had developed to the point where only a

few meters of available drawdown remained. A major change was required.

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#### 4.2 Previous consultation process

In the authors' opinion, the previous consultation approach involved a process that was flawed, and is perhaps representative of current thinking in many public infrastructure related projects. The proponents likely failed to recognize or employ a consultation technique suitable to the situation (see Rowe et al. 2005).

Preliminary scientific studies for a water supply in this location had been previously undertaken and results suggested that the supply was likely to be ample to serve the needs of existing users as well as the needs of the City of Selkirk. While a water rights license was likely to be granted with the proper scientific study undertaken (i.e. further field testing), it was apparent so-called 'social license' had not been achieved. This resulted in a perfectly adequate water supply not being used simply due to misplaced social fears.

Previous consultation efforts essentially consisted of one or more town hall meetings at which hundreds of angry individuals did not allow proponents to carry on the meeting in an effective manner. There were likely assumptions on the proponent's part that suggested that logical science and proponent assurances should have been sufficiently adequate to appeal to 'reasonable citizens'.

#### 4.3 Consultation Methodology

##### 4.3.1 Structure

The most recent attempt to acquire a water rights license for the City of Selkirk established a different approach to public consultation and stakeholder engagement from that of the previous attempts. This approach, the Stakeholder Tier System, recognized that different stakeholders should be treated differently, based on a categorization of stakeholders according to potential impact and/or potential level of concern. Often public consultation programs are based on the opposite premise – that all stakeholders should be treated 'equally' (i.e. in the same way).

Table 1 outlines the categories used for sorting stakeholders. The tier categories were used as follows: to help identify potential stakeholders, to determine an appropriate method for dealing with each stakeholder, to determine timing (order) in which to approach each

stakeholder, and to select a notification method for each stakeholder.

Table 1. Stakeholder Tiers

Tier	Description of Tier Criteria
Tier 1	Potential direct impact to existing water supply for residence or business, government authority with governing jurisdiction over land or water supply.
Tier 2	Potential indirect impact to existing water supply for residence or business, government authority with governing jurisdiction over land or water supply.
Tier 3	Other individual or group expressing interest in the project.

Table 2 describes the order that each stakeholder type was approached in, the type of meeting that was offered to each stakeholder, and the notification method in each case.

Table 2. Meeting order, type and notification methods

Tier	Order	Type	Notification
Tier 1	First	Invited face-to-face meeting	Direct letter; follow-up efforts if no initial response
Tier 2	Second	Invited small group or individual meeting	Direct letter, email or phone call; no follow up if no initial response
Tier 3	Third	Public open house	Public advertisement

The general principal associated with these classifications is that those stakeholders that are likely to be more concerned or more directly impacted, should be dealt with first, and those stakeholders that are less likely to be concerned or impacted should be dealt with subsequently. This simple premise is generally based on notions of common courtesy, which the attributes as primarily responsible for the success of the City of Selkirk water supply consultation process.

This consultation approach is notably different from another common consultation approach in which all stakeholders (often referred to as 'the general public') are invited by a broad public notification effort (e.g. public advertisement) to attend a public meeting late in the process, generally once study results have been acquired. Proponents using this approach will often make use of the public meeting or town hall format to initially identify any specific stakeholder concerns as they arise in the meeting and then follow up with specific stakeholders as required. This approach may be seen as inadequate from the perspective of many Tier 1 stakeholders, due to a higher expectation to provide meaningful input, and due to a lack of recognition of their distinct interests.

##### 4.3.2 Multiple Consultation Rounds

The consultation process was carried out over a 12-month period. Three rounds of consultation were employed. The purpose of each round is described in Table 3.

Table 3. Purpose of Consultation Rounds

Round	Purpose of Round
Round 1	<p>Introduce the project, the project team, and the intended process.</p> <p>Listen to and record stakeholders' concerns and interests.</p> <p>Respond to questions and provide educational context for water supply works.</p>
Round 2	<p>Provide follow-up information and additional educational context as required.</p> <p>Prepare for field testing by asking for voluntary baseline testing of existing wells (Tier 1 only).</p>
Round 3	<p>Provide results of field tests.</p> <p>Respond to lingering questions.</p> <p>Advise of next steps, including license application and timing.</p>
Round 4	<p>Provide results of license application.</p> <p>Maintain communication during construction period.</p>

#### 4.4 Related Critical Techniques

##### 4.4.1 Elimination of Stakeholder Surprise

The tier process relies on the concept that no stakeholder should be surprised by any project action at any point during the project period. This meant that at each stakeholder meeting, next steps were always identified, and no project action was taken prior to the completion of each round of communications. For example, prior to the completion of Round 1 consultation activities, no on-site work was undertaken and no on-site presence of any kind was allowed (e.g. no company trucks, no survey crews, etc.), until all stakeholders were informed about what to expect. Similarly, no formal licensing application was submitted until the field testing was complete and the results had been explained to all stakeholders. This technique had the general effect of eliminating surprises, which contributed to trust-building efforts between stakeholders and the proponent and its representatives, which in turn contributed to the likelihood that stakeholders would accept the results of the scientific study as legitimate.

##### 4.4.2 Modification of Language

Project proponents sometimes make the mistake of using determinative language too early in a process, which can have the effect of instilling a sense of pre-determination or assumption of project outcomes in the mind of a stakeholder, thus undermining the legitimacy of the consultation process (i.e. why bother consulting when the outcome is already determined). In this case, team members were asked to modify their language such that a successful project outcome (i.e. a license granted) was never presumed. For example, rather than saying "we're going to be on-site drilling next month", project members might say "if a license is granted, we'd like to be drilling in May". The use of this deferring-type language was considered important in reducing the level of concern among stakeholders.

##### 4.4.3 Experienced Facilitator

Tier 1 meetings with area landowners required the use of an experienced facilitator. Initial meetings were particularly potentially volatile in nature given the level of previously expressed concerns regarding impacts to existing wells in the region. The experience of a professional facilitator was seen as critical to ensuring a civil, respectful, useful, engagement between stakeholders and the project team. Other accountability techniques were important to help promote civil behavior among participants including appropriate meeting type, appropriate venue selection, requests for RSVP, sign-in sheets, comment sheets, use of a flip chart, meeting agendas, house rules, participant introductions, and the use of specific listening techniques.

##### 4.4.4 Stakeholder Education

The process provided significant time and opportunity for the project team to explain the nature of hydro-geology in the local area and the region. Knowledge of 'how it works' was considered a significant factor in dispelling myths, reducing fears, and building trust between the participants and the project team. It is critical to note that educational topics were offered only once participants were clear about the project process and sufficient introductions to the project team had been established.

##### 4.4.5 Transparent Results

Throughout the process participants were advised that all results of any testing undertaken would be shared both collectively and individually as requested. In order to create a setting for transparency, Tier 1 stakeholders were invited to participate in a local well-inventory process to help establish a baseline condition prior to field testing. The fact that only one participant out of a total of 29 Tier 1 participants declined to participate in the well inventory, serves as an indication of both project understanding and trust in the process.

Following field-testing, the project team shared the results of the proposed water supply pump test, and those results were accepted as legitimate by 100% of participants.

#### 4.5 Process Efficacy

Previous attempts at securing a license for a water supply for the City of Selkirk had resulted in hundreds of stakeholders expressing opposition to the concept of a water supply being located in the area. As a result, in those cases no field studies were initiated.

In this case study, structured feedback from participants from all tiers regarding the efficacy of the process (as distinct from the feelings about the project itself) was overwhelmingly positive. Table 4 outlines the feedback from participants of the process.

At the beginning of this project, many stakeholders that had joined initial meetings had vociferously expressed the substantial concerns as they had previously expressed

Table 4. Respondent Understanding

Response (%)	
Respondent understands reasons for process and identified solution	92%
Respondent 'somewhat;' understands reasons for process and identified solution	8%
Respondent does not understand reasons for process and identified solution	0%

n=36

during earlier consultation attempts. The stakeholder tier process resulted in all of these concerns being addressed. All opposition to the field-testing was withdrawn, a license for the project was granted with conditions as recommended by the project team, and the project was constructed after decades of rejection.

## 5 REFERENCES

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