



Michigan COMMENTARY

Public Involvement: Rebuilding Trust in an Age of Uncertainty

David Gruber, Senior Consultant for Public Affairs

INTRODUCTION

Late in 1991 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that in Swan Hills, Alberta, something unusual had happened: The people of that remote Canadian town had actively sought a hazardous waste treatment facility for their community. There was little alarm about environmental risk; the plant meant jobs for the economically depressed area, and the townspeople sought it with gusto.

Normally, such facilities are shunned by community residents regardless of the economic benefits. People fear pollution and resent being bullied into accepting reputedly dangerous projects. Alberta officials embarked on an untraditional approach to such a dilemma: They decided to foster competition for the plant and let residents across the province make their own decisions about it. The provincial government launched a massive hazardous waste education program in 120 municipalities, required voters to voice interest in the facility through local referenda, and asked for takers. Swan Hills won.

The spoils of victory included some of the more common benefits bestowed on communities willing to host such projects. The contractor, Canadian oil-drilling firm Bovar, Inc., agreed to help build a golf course and support a hockey school. But the company and the province, co-owners of the plant, went farther: They opened the plant to the public. Daily tours permitted residents to see plant operations up close. A citizen advisory committee was established and provided with monthly reports to help it monitor plant activities, and when it suggested improvements, the plant carried them out. Even local environmentalists were favorably impressed.

The Alberta-Bovar effort is not the only one to involve the public in siting or monitoring a normally unwanted facility. A handful of other companies and government programs have taken similar steps. (Dow Chemical Company, for example, has established citizen advisory committees in the cities in which it has plants.) These entities are ahead of others in recognizing the growing communications breakdown between government and business on the one hand and the public on the other. The chief result of this breakdown is an alienated, mistrustful citizenry that increasingly registers its displeasure in the political arena. Disgruntled local residents can delay or bring to a halt any number of community projects—landfills, power lines, treatment plants, halfway houses, and the like. At the national level aggravated citizens gave serious weight to a third-party candidate's run for president in 1992 and approved term limits in fourteen states—a rebuff to the two political parties and the political careerists that comprise them.

What do these people want? Much more, it turns out, than an end to the proverbial politics or business "as usual." They want some *control* over their lives and their environment, something they believe has passed into the hands of distant corporate experts and government bureaucrats who do not speak their language and do not have the public's interest at heart. Helping the public to regain that control through involvement in policy-making simultaneously provides government and corporate decision makers with a deeper understanding of public needs and a richer source of policy options with which to reach their goals.

THE PUBLIC MIND

The public today actually is of two minds: It is ambivalent, alienated, and wary of major institutions, yet it also is hopeful, active, and eager to have its faith in institutions restored. Through polls, interviews, and

focus groups, Public Sector Consultants has measured the attitudes of Michigan residents about advanced technology, large corporations, and government. Ambivalence over technology is clear: Eighty-two percent of respondents in a statewide opinion survey said they look forward to technological change, yet 65 percent believe that science produces as many problems as it solves. Seventy percent expressed distrust in large American corporations; chemical, pharmaceutical, and media companies are regarded as unreliable sources of technical information. When asked who should make decisions about emerging technologies, half of the survey's respondents said corporations, government, *and citizens* should share in decision making—more than twice the number who believe that only corporations and government, or corporations alone, should make such decisions.

Interviews with a broad range of people specifically affected by or involved with new and old technologies elicited a full spectrum of health and environmental concerns, which many see in personal terms. Genetic engineering may promise better-tasting, longer-lasting foods, but in the minds of many interviewees it also raises economic and moral questions that require answers before the science is broadly applied. Others believe that the proliferation of electrical power lines poses possible danger to health and the environment, threatens property values, looks ugly, and simply is a nuisance. Many interviewees criticize corporations for sacrificing the public interest to short-term profits and chide government for being inept, burdensome, and untrustworthy. It may fairly be said that by and large, Michigan residents want technology to progress slowly and with rigorous review in which the public plays a part. They want corporations and government to act responsibly and keep long-term health and environmental interests in mind. Many express a strong desire to work with companies and government toward a greater understanding of the issues that divide them. And many believe corporations and government should initiate the effort.

Such findings, according to long-time national pollster and social observer Daniel Yankelovich, reflect a widening gap between society's experts and the lay public and a resurgent desire by the latter to bridge it. The experts form what Yankelovich terms the "culture of technical control," which applies not only to high-tech inventors but to the whole panoply of decision makers who manage the application of expertise to the nation's problems. "Our culture is busy exercising technical control over as many aspects of the human environment as it can—the economy, the physical environment, provisions for food and shelter, threats to health and longevity, national security, and conquering space," Yankelovich wrote in 1991 in *Coming to Public Judgment*. "The method our culture has chosen for exercising such control is the application of expert thinking in science, technology, economic enterprises, government, the policy sciences, and large organizational structures."

Expertise is vital to society, Yankelovich says, but the experts overstep their bounds. In a democracy, decision making is reserved for the public. Sound self-government can arise only from a public able to make policy decisions based not just on opinion as registered in polls but on the thoughtful consideration of issues over an adequate period of time. A balance must be struck between experts and the public. Processes must be developed to permit the public to evaluate issues and come to a reasoned judgment. This will necessitate changes in the way policy is formulated and decided, Yankelovich says.

Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, sees the problem in more personal terms. In 1991 in *Modernity and Self-Identity* he wrote that expertise has made the world at once a more secure and a less secure place in which to live. It has made the world more secure, at least in the industrialized nations, by conquering diseases and creating reliable systems for meeting human needs, such as transportation and the delivery of safe water supplies. It makes the world less secure in two ways—by producing a continuing stream of new goods, services, and systems that poses new risks to everyday life and by continually revising what is known about the world through never-ending research.

Such an environment poses continual challenges to individuals and their communities, according to Giddens. It presents them with ongoing choices and risks and in doing so undermines their trust and security in the routines of daily life. Each day the individual sets foot on shifting sand. A person's task in this environment is to plan his/her life by negotiating these changes, which means continually rebuilding the trust

and security needed to develop one's life and advance into the future. This is *life politics*, or the politics of choice, Giddens says, and it has both local and global ramifications. How people live at the local level—whether they choose to drive cars or accept food in colorful plastic packaging, for example—affects the global environment; similarly, changes in global systems, such as the international monetary system, can affect local choices.

In short, the public senses what the sociologists have observed. Major decision makers and the institutions they run create a perpetual sense of instability which the public must overcome in order to live life with some semblance of security. Any single program or project spawned by the decision makers can raise a host of interrelated public concerns. Yet communication between decision makers and the public is attenuated at best. People feel as if they are on quicksand, and no one is coming to their rescue.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

The traditional means by which corporations and government communicate with the public no longer work very well. Messages from distrusted institutions, often delivered through the media, are not believed—if they are heard at all. Limited attempts at public dialogue, such as press conferences and public hearings, are poor forums for detailed consideration of complex issues, and they often are manipulated to the advantage of those who sponsor them. The media often are chastised for presenting too much negative information, but insofar as scientific subjects are concerned, evidence shows that both positive and negative coverage raise public concern. Thus the media appear to be of little help in addressing certain issues no matter how presented.

In general, the news media focus not on the normal course of daily life, but on departures from the norm. They assume that everyday life operates in a fairly organized manner, and that the public and private institutions that affect daily life are reasonably effective and responsible. Their mission, as they see it, is to inform the public of departures from or threats to this sense of order. They act as a public alert system. That done, however, they offer few suggestions as to how to address the resulting public agitation. That is not their beat. The media display to the public a torn social fabric but leave its mending to others.

To develop sound policy and obtain public support under such circumstances, business and government must work with the public to develop new decision-making processes; they must pick up where the media leave off. If the public can anticipate, understand, and play a role in planning change, it will gain greater confidence in the future because it will have a measure of control. The processes to accomplish this should have the following characteristics:

- Participation by a broad range of people affected by the issue or project at hand
- Participation by corporate and government decision makers
- Two-way communication among participants
- An open exchange of information
- Use of lay language in discussing technical matters
- Neutral forums for discussion and policy-making
- Feedback mechanisms
- Ongoing operation in order to foresee issues and handle them as they develop

A model public involvement planning process would have five steps. (1) Working together, participants identify mutual interests and set their goals. This establishes a framework for the process and gives it direction. (2) Participants take stock of the current situation, which gives them an idea of the resources needed to reach their goals. The goals and the starting point together define the scope of the project and its purpose:

developing a strategy to get from one point to the other. (3) Participants develop options, or possibilities for action, and assess and compare the risks involved with each. Comparative risk assessment is a key part of the effort. It allows participants to weigh risks in light of their own values and preferences. They then can decide which risks they are willing to accept in achieving their objectives. Comparative risk assessment addresses the "problem of uncertainty," says Jonathan Lash, director of the Environmental Law Center at Vermont Law School. It involves a marriage of values and science that produces "rational, comprehensive and explicable . . . policy through an open and pluralistic process." (4) Participants in the process select the best pathway to their goals in light of their risk assessment. (5) They monitor the effects of their decisions and remain watchful for risks as yet unknown.

Engaging in such a process would give business and government the advantage of public input, enabling them to better shape their policies and programs to meet public needs and allay public concerns. Public involvement also would provide decision makers with an early warning system, alerting them to potential problems or risks well ahead of time, saving costs down the road, and improving the decision-making process itself. Above all, such a process could begin to restore public confidence and trust in major institutions and the everyday matters that those institutions influence and regulate. The public would regain the sense of connectedness now gone from everyday life and with greater confidence be able to plan their future and that of their communities. If people know what changes are coming, they can better prepare for them. If they have a way to discuss and analyze risk and are allowed to make choices in accepting or rejecting risk, they will have less to fear from the next round of change bannered in threatening headlines. The reward is greater public support for business and government programs, because through public involvement the public can begin to call them own.

In January Public Sector Consultants acquired Mitchell Communications Circle of East Lansing, adding public involvement to its range of expertise. A newly established Public Affairs Department specializes in public involvement programs for business, government, and nonprofit organizations and in conference planning and media relations. The department also operates the Michigan Political Leadership Program (MPLP) for Michigan State University. Robert L. Mitchell, founder of Mitchell Communications Circle and vice president of PSC, has extensive experience in public participation and is recognized for his innovative work at all levels of government and in the private sector. Kathleen Schafer, director of public affairs, brings to the department her skills in public involvement and management, which she gained in state government and through numerous civic activities. David Gruber, a senior consultant, has experience in public involvement, communications, and law. Maura Dewan, assistant meeting planner, has a background in event planning for state government and for the MPLP. Cheryl Bergman, public affairs assistant with a background in communications and election campaign management, rounds out the department.

Public Sector Consultants also has expanded its environmental services staff. This area is one in which technical and public involvement expertise frequently is necessary. Senior Vice President William R. Rustem, who has been with PSC for several years, is the firm's senior consultant for environmental and recreation projects and research. He served as chief staff advisor on environmental matters for Gov. William G. Milliken and has been instrumental in numerous statewide legislative and environmental research efforts. Jack Bails, former deputy director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), joined PSC as a senior consultant in January. In his nearly thirty years with the DNR, he developed and managed the first state environmental enforcement division in the nation and served as line manager for all natural resource management programs in Michigan. Leslie Wells joined PSC as a natural resource consultant in 1992 after graduating from Duke University with a masters degree in environmental management. While at Duke she designed and conducted an analysis of the university's waste stream and made recommendations for future campus recycling efforts.