CCRE Commentary

APRIL 2013

IN THIS ISSUE:

Overcoming Public Opposition to New Electricity Infrastructure Projects

by Emay Cowx

Council for Clean & Reliable Electricity
transforming the way we think about power

www.thinkingpower.ca

THE AUTHOR

Emay Cowx

Emay Cowx is an International Association of Facilitators Certified™ Professional Facilitator and Principal Consultant of C2C Strategies. She came into practicing facilitation and strategic dialogue by way of a 25-year career in the North American energy sector with companies such as TransCanada PipeLines and the Ontario Power Authority. Her insight into bridging technical with social considerations is the result of wearing many hats in the energy supply chain. To learn more about the author, please visit: www.c2cstrategies.ca..

Declaration

The author advises clients and assists them with implementing electricity infrastructure and other types of projects in Ontario and elsewhere. She has no direct ownership interest in any of these facilities.

The Council for Clean & Reliable Electricity
The Council is a federally incorporated non-profit organization that was formed to provide a platform for open public dialogue and a solutions-oriented approach to the challenges of the energy sector. It is a forum where representatives from universities, public and private sector business leaders, and strategic planning professionals collaborate to broaden the public debate on energy issues. The Council has organized conferences on distributed generation, biomass, coal, nuclear and public sector governance in the electricity sector.

While the Council subjects all papers to independent peer review, the views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the reviewers, the Council or its members.

www.thinkingpower.ca

Overcoming Public Opposition to New Electricity Infrastructure Projects

Emay Cowx

There's more to building new electricity infrastructure than engineering and financing. One of the greatest hurdles continues to be winning public approval in host communities. Projects are often delayed or cancelled, with politicians involved on one side, celebrities on the other, and rhetoric ramping up based on disinformation generously and quickly spread through the Internet. Clearly, infrastructure projects impact people, and proponents need to demonstrate more than technical expertise to engage with communities and earn their acceptance. A new approach is required to manage social risk and get social license for infrastructure projects.

"technical expertise alone will not earn public acceptance"

BACKGROUND – ONTARIO CASE STUDY

In 1910, the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario built a 110,000-volt hydroelectric transmission line from Niagara Falls that brought 20th century progress to 14 communities in southwestern Ontario. At the time, the province's population was 2.6 million. Over the next century, Ontario's population more than quintupled to 13.4 million, with about one-half of the province living in the Greater Toronto Area. This region alone is expected to continue growing to just over eight million people by 2036.[1] New infrastructure will be required to meet their electricity needs.

One hundred years ago, incredible advancements in physical engineering and mechanical technologies made possible Ontario's first major electricity transmission line. The benefits of such new infrastructure were obvious to everyone. It powered advanced technologies and fuelled dramatic farm and industrial productivity increases. Social acceptance came easily, motivated by the lure of economic prosperity.

Today, a century later, readily available electricity is taken for granted, supporting our addiction to electrical devices that enhance our everyday lives. Many of us start our mornings with a java-jolt from fancy coffee machines and can't manage our days without a CrackBerry-type smart phone or tablet. The lack of second thought as to what powers our life-coping devices demonstrates how unconsciously tied is our energy-hungry lifestyle to electricity's continuing availability.

Recent experience in establishing new infrastructure to support electricity distribution renewal and growth has resulted in significant challenges in public acceptance. Those living in urban areas surrounding Toronto are familiar with news items beginning like: "The Ontario government is backing down from plans to build a controversial gas-fired power plant in Oakville, which faced determined opposition from the community." [2]

[1] Ontario Ministry of Finance. Ontario Population Projections Update. "Highlights" and "Population Counts: Canada, Ontario and Regions."
[2] "Worried Liberals pull plug on Oakville gas plant." The Toronto Star. Oct. 07, 2010. Available at: http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/article/872042--worried-liberals-pull-plug-on-oakville-gas-plant.

But this is not just a rejection of traditional generating plants. Both wind and solar projects have also experienced push back. Indeed, when facing re-election, Ontario's governing party lost seats in areas of strong opposition to the wind turbines that it had championed. As well, landowners are suing wind-power developers, claiming losses in property values.[3]

Without a doubt, the past century of readily available electricity has provided massive benefits, as evidenced by our rising standard of living and growing economy. However, in this same period increasing urban and industrial development have placed obvious pressure on the environment, resulting in heightened social and environmental awareness. The growth in the sustainability movement has broadened our collective thinking to consider economic wealth in tandem with environmental and social considerations, as defined and valued by a community. This evolution in values, from an almost exclusive emphasis on economic priorities to broader concerns encompassing environmental and social dimensions, requires a more comprehensive approach when moving forward with siting infrastructure.

MORE EDUCATION IS NOT THE SOLUTION

Industry and government leaders often say that the answer to building public support for major electricity infrastructure projects is more education and awareness. The outcomes of both approaches might elevate the level of public knowledge, but should not be equated with enhancing the probability of acceptance.

"in public engagement, quantity is not a substitute for quality"

Education + Awareness ≠ Social Acceptance

Regulators have historically also noted the need for more public involvement in the decision-making process, and in some cases further commented on the quality of the dialogue. As the B.C. Utilities Commission (BCUC) put it some years ago: "Some of the issues explored in the hearing process could have been avoided had BCTC [British Columbia Transmission Company] engaged key stakeholders in a more open discussion of project alternatives." [4]

Subsequently, a similar sentiment was expressed by a consultant's report to the Ontario Energy Board that concluded, "Stakeholder dialogue is emerging as a key process in the jurisdictions where fundamental changes are receiving attention." [5]

Increased dialogue is certainly a means to such an end. Such dialogue, however, is only productive and supportive of project (and policy) objectives if the developer understands how people will internalize that information in ways that are relevant to their individual or community interests and concerns. In public consultation, quantity is not a substitute for quality.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL FRICTION

Society's growing need for electricity, combined with industry's current approach to public dialogue has created a tension known as "social friction." This friction arises as a result of differences in perceptions, lack of mutual understanding of values and unequal capacities (time, money, knowledge) among interdependent stakeholders

[3] Public pressure also led to Health Canada launching a study last year to conduct a research study that will explore the relationship between wind turbine noise and health effects on people living near wind power developments.
[4] BCUC. "Commission Order No. C-4-06: BCTC Application for Vancouver Island Transmission Reinforcement Project." July 7, 2006, p.38.
[5] KEMA, Inc. "Report to the Ontario Energy Board." p. 11.

involved in a planning process.[6] Much like applying a physical lubricant to reduce friction between two masses, the relevant social sciences can provide the process, methods and tools to reduce the potential for social friction.

For example, social sciences can help us understand judgment and decision-making, based on studies of human psychology involving emotions, perception and thinking. By understanding how people process information, what they value and how they knit various elements into a judgment about the acceptability of a proposed project, policy-makers and project developers can better understand how people perceive its risks, benefits, tradeoffs and acceptability. This understanding can inform the development of focused strategies to engage key stakeholders in dialogue beyond the project's physical engineering design, thereby mitigating social friction.

Furthermore, behavioural psychology can provide insights that will help develop effective strategies for stakeholder engagement, community consultation and communications. The result is a higher quality conversation and an improved collaboration with stakeholders that can enhance public support for a proposed project.

"social sciences provide tools to reduce social friction"

Investing early in research to understand project stakeholders at a values-based level will result in more focused, collaborative public dialogue rather than debate around (generally negative) opinions. A well-designed structured dialogue[7] process will serve to build the public's knowledge about a particular infrastructure proposal. Combined with sustained engagement, this approach allows impacted stakeholders the opportunity to explore the risks, benefits and tradeoffs about a planned project, and make informed judgments and decisions about it.

How individuals perceive project benefits and risks is important since infrastructure projects affect each person uniquely. Proactively addressing individuals' risk/benefit perceptions can go a long way to mitigating social friction and reducing the likelihood that common concerns will coalesce into a community issue that may prevent projects from advancing.

TOOLS FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

One example of how social sciences research can inform stakeholder dialogue about infrastructure siting is seen in Figure 1. This figure shows that there are three broad areas of information sought by stakeholders who are trying to make a risk assessment (and, by corollary, the impact on their community) and how the stakeholder will apply such information.[8]

Figure 1 - How Stakeholders Use Information

Type of Information Sought to Assess Risk	Purpose of Information
Advice and answers	Seeking explicit instructions or advice from a trustworthy expert.
Numbers and data	A quantitative summary of expert knowledge in order to make informed decisions.
Process and framing	Provides a deeper understanding of how the risk is created and managed. Permits self-monitoring of the situation.

Source: Adapted by author; see footnote 8.

[6] Social friction is a neutral term applicable to public planning processes suggested by Decision Partners, a global expert centre for applied research in judgment, decision-making and behaviour.
[7] Wikipedia defines structured dialogue as "represent[ing] a class of dialogue practices developed as a means of orienting the dialogic discourse toward problem understanding and consensual action."
[8] M.G. Morgan et al. Risk Communication. pp. 5-6.

Before one can develop an engagement and outreach approach that responds to stakeholders' specific information needs, a project developer must take the time to understand the situation from the stakeholder's perspective by undertaking pre-consultation research. Acquiring this insight requires an upfront investment of time, resources and attention that is typically not being expended. Otherwise, why wouldn't the one-off, travelling town-hall style public meetings produce higher levels of social acceptance of project objectives?

CONCLUSION

Utilizing social science-grounded processes, methods and tools will help elicit a deeper understanding of stakeholders' needs, values and priorities. Through investment in research and structured dialogue, this qualitative data can reveal how stakeholders form lasting judgments, rather than opinions that can fluctuate over time in response to media and other fleeting influences. With critical insight into stakeholders' perspectives of what an infrastructure project or policy means to them and their communities, project developers, policy-makers and planners can develop effective engagement processes and communications strategies to engage and respond to stakeholders in ways that support their decision-making and judgment processes.

"acquiring insight requires investing time and resources"

Today's public is better educated, better informed and better connected than even a decade ago. The approach to gaining their acceptance for necessary infrastructure projects must also change to reflect the new reality of increased public expectations.

REFERENCES

Automated Genealogy. "1911 Census of Canada Indexing Project." Available at: http://automatedgenealogy.com/census11.

British Columbia Utilities Commission. Commission Order No. C-4-06. "British Columbia Transmission Corporation: An Application for a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity for the Vancouver Island Transmission Reinforcement Project." July 7, 2006. Available at: http://transmission.bchydro.com/nr/rdonlyres/502cb075-1c6a-4038-aa9f-8e0c926ca032/0/vitrdecision.pdf.

Brooks, Jake. Major study likely to raise the bar in stakeholder engagement. 2007. IPPSO FACTO, Volume 21, No. 5, November 2007, pp. 14-15. Association of Power Producers of Ontario. ISSN 0847-1460.

Carpenter, Denise. "Engaging Stakeholders: The causes of conflict and crisis." Presentation at Richard Ivey School of Business Network for Business Sustainability. University of Western Ontario. February 2008.
Available at: http://nbs.net/wp-content/uploads/Denise-Carpenter-EPCOR.pdf.

Denison, Merrill. The People's Power: The History of Ontario Hydro. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. 1960.

Health Canada. 2012. "Health Canada Announces Wind Turbine Noise and Health Study." News Release. July 10. Available at: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/media/nr-cp/_2012/2012-109-eng.php.

KEMA, Inc. 2009. Report to the Ontario Energy Board: Leveraging Network Utility Asset Management Practices for Regulatory Purposes. November. Available at: http://www.ontarioenergyboard.ca/OEB/_Documents/Documents/Report_Asset_Mgmt_Investment_Plans_20091218.pdf.

Morgan, M.G., et al. Risk Communication: A Mental Models Approach. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2002.

Ontario. Ministry of Finance. "Ontario Population Projections Update: 2011 – 2036. Ontario and Its 49 Census Divisions." Available at: http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/economy/demographics/projections/#s3.

Ontario. Ministry of Finance. "2011 CENSUS HIGHLIGHTS: Factsheet 1 - Population Counts: Canada, Ontario and Regions." Available at: http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/economy/demographics/census/cenhi11-1.html