



Public Involvement Our Critical Next Step

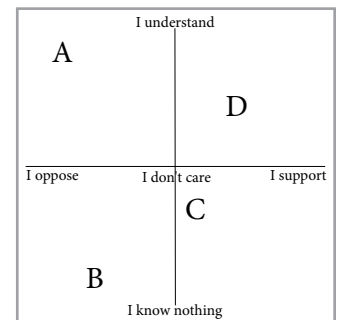
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As with many community infrastructure projects, public involvement in Harwich wastewater issues has been 'modest' during these lengthy initial stages. As we now move toward implementation, we must significantly and effectively expand this.

- ☑ Public involvement seeks to build strong links with key constituencies – citizens, of course, but also the Harwich business community, local government agencies, neighboring towns and the Cape Cod Commission.
- ☑ Public involvement means information flowing out from the Town AND input flowing in from the Community. It is an active process that solicits questions, seeks expression of concerns, and nurtures a healthy and informing debate.
- ☑ Public involvement means a systematic process of building informed consent¹ across our community.
- X Public involvement does NOT mean smothering the community in a propaganda campaign to sell an ill-understood project (however worthy the intent).

In tackling this, we face two key challenges:

1 There are multiple "publics" ... and each needs a customized involvement strategy. It is easy to think of THE Harwich "public" monolithically, but this would be a serious mistake. We've noted one dimension of this above (citizens, businesses, agencies, etc.). Here is another one – in essence, a matrix in which we view a person's level of support for the project, and his/her understanding of it. Let's briefly consider four different profiles:



- A Knowledgeable Opponents:** Our challenge here is to understand the source of the opposition, and find arguments for meeting/mitigating them.
- B Uninformed Naysayers:** Our challenge is first to build a personal connection to the issue of wastewater ("hmmm, this does impact me") and then overcome a (likely) bias against government solutions.
- C Luke-warm Fence-standers:** Our challenge is to engage these folks, building both understanding and tapping into an incipient well-spring of hope for civic action.
- D Potential evangelists:** Our challenge is to deepen their understanding, and help them become effective agents of change within our community.

2 We need to better understand these 'publics' – BEFORE we take action. This is traditionally labeled a 'needs assessment,' and consists of building understanding along dimensions such as:

- Demographic factors: Are there useful patterns (in terms of levels of support and understanding) based upon factors such as age, gender, income or length of residence in Harwich?
- Belief structures: What do individuals (and organizations) believe about wastewater (not-an-issue-here < — > serious issue)? about who is responsible for 'fixing it' (the public or private sector? If the public, at what level: Harwich? Barnstable county? Massachusetts? federal EPA?)? about what has already been done in the Harwich planning work (from nothing to well-informed)? about awareness of available roles going forward (again, from nothing to well-informed)?

Based upon this we have three recommendations at this point:

- ▶ Hire a professional Communications Manager with experience in building informed consent (this is NOT the stereotypical "public relations" manager!).
- ▶ Through the Communications Manager, conduct a useful needs assessment, and build an "informed consent" strategy for each of the relevant 'publics.'
- ▶ In the meantime, build a Response Capability, with both "Hot-Line" (respond to inquiries within one business day, complaints within 4 hours) and "Media Monitoring" (to rapidly correct misinformation) dimensions.

Some Advice from Others

- Involve the public; confront concerns early and often.
- Meet the public where they are on the learning curve.
- Listen thoughtfully to critics and skeptics; build an environment of trust, competence, fairness, empathy.
- Build a sense of team – open conflict among governmental department and/or non-governmental groups undermines confidence.
- Recognize the needs of the media (which may focus more on politics than the issues, and artificial simplicity more than reasoned understanding).
- "One size does not fit all ..."

¹ This concept ("a systematic approach to building informed consent") lies at the heart of the work done by the Institute for Participatory Management and Planning as they work with public sector agencies and staff to become more effective