LOW-LEVEL WASTE SITING:

FACTORS IN COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Development of new low-level radioactive waste disposal facilities to provide needed regional capacity requires application of numerous technical and sociopolitical factors. Chem-Nuclear Systems, Inc., is now applying the company's decade of successful operations in the community of Barnwell, South Carolina to develop new sites within a new technical and regulatory framework. We are using a site development strategy that employs a first-level geologic and hydrologic screening system but then goes on to apply environmental, engineering and sociopolitical factors to select a location that offers the optimal probability for successful licensing and development. This paper will discuss that strategy and the areas where it has been applied.

The country's most technically-perfect piece of property, with a facility designed and operated by the book, is not a viable operation unless the local community, the county or area, and the state find it to be an acceptable development. Obtaining that critical acceptance calls for consideration of the sociopolitical environment from the beginning of the process. It requires searching for areas where good technical and market features are accompanied by a community desire for industrial and economic development. It demands an early and open program of public participation in the site evaluation process, accompanied by an active public information effort.

A low-level waste management facility can be a valuable addition to a community's business base, and those positive factors should be highlighted for the residents. The proposing site operator's policies on enriching site communities, both through the fiscal impacts of the operation and through civic participation, should be outlined and reinforced. Existing economic and social conditions require careful characterization to allow meaningful evaluation of impacts of the project.

Citizens in the community have divergent levels of interest in development of a project such as a new disposal site. While some may want only an overview of the project and the process, or no information at all, there will be individuals or groups with definite positive or negative interests. The public information program must be designed to provide the education that is needed on all aspects of the project. While the majority of information should be aimed at the general public, there will also be a need to provide technical detail for independent evaluation by others.

Building a strong network of informed support in a community that stands to benefit from the operation is key to successful siting. Of course, the site must be technically acceptable, the state or federal regulators must approve the applications for permits and licenses, and the engineering and design must be appropriate for the conditions. It is also important that community members understand the stringent licensing requirements and are satisfied with the regulatory agencies' commitment to enforcement. Based on Chem-Nuclear's past and current experience with this strategy, we are confident that developing new sites in today's environment is not an insurmountable problem.

INTRODUCTION

Developing new low-level waste disposal sites is a process that requires state and regional political support, technical suitability and licensability, and community acceptance. All three are essential elements of successful development. They can be viewed coloquially as a three-legged stool, and without any one of the three legs the effort (in this case siting versus sitting) falls flat.

Each component of the siting effort is equal in importance; all three are critical. States have been working hard to form regional compacts and select host areas, and certainly a supportive state political environment is needed. Technical suitability of the site is essential. Only a technically defensible site can be licensed and regulated and the investing operator must be able to comfortably assume liability for its performance after closure.

The third aspect, community acceptance, is a local political problem. More important, it is a local public acceptance challenge, since political leaders respond to the concerns and desires of their constituents. The country's most technically perfect piece of property, with a facility designed and operated exactly by the book, will not be a viable operation unless the local community, the county, and the state find it to be an acceptable development. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the least understood element, community acceptance, in terms of why it is essential and how it can be effectively accomplished.

OBJECTIVES

An effective program of public involvement for a siting project is expensive, time-consuming, and burns out the people who work in the field. Why, then, is it so necessary? The primary objective is to reduce or minimize local opposition to the development of the facility while building a constituency of community

support. This also creates a comfortable local environment for continuing operations. It is impossible to eliminate opposition, but that extreme is not necessary. What is required is to focus the interested people in the community on the real issues, on the elements that can productively be discussed or negotiated, and in that way remove as much opposition as possible.

The approach to achieving this objective must incorporate several philosophies. First, all parties must understand that the public role is consultative; final decision-making rests with the developer and regulators. The decision-makers must genuinely commit to incorporate the views of the public to improve the soundness of the decisions; simple endorsement of decisions already made is neither desirable nor possible. Finally, complete openness is essential, both in development of the site and in later operation.

It is the developer's responsibility and objective to persuade the community to accept the proposed facility. They deserve a full-scale and honest effort to educate and inform them about all of the project's features so they can become equipped to form opinions. If the question of "do you want a radioactive dump in your neighborhood" were put to an uninformed vote in any community, the answer would be "No", out of fear of the unknown. Since the developer's goal is to minimize local opposition to the facility, the task is to provide an atmosphere conducive to informed opinions and in that way gain the essential local acceptance.

It is foolish to think that anyone can slip a radioactive waste disposal facility into any community without notice or opposition, but don't assume that no support exists. Quiet or open support that may exist needs to be thoroughly searched out and an environment created so those supporters can comfortably speak up.

STRATEGY FOR PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE

One of the major points to be made about the process of gaining community acceptance is that the developer can control public perceptions of the project. Often it seems as though the "anti" groups who oppose any particular development are acting unpredictably and have the power to stop or change the direction of the project. There are discouraging accounts of how power plants, dams, mines, and disposal sites have been halted by opposition, and that seems to take control from the project proponent and give it to the public. It is the perception of the project that decides the actions of the public, and it is the responsibility of the developer to shape that perception. The fundamental concerns of community members tend to fall into three basic categories:

- How will I benefit?
- Will it hurt me, my family, or future generations?
- Why should I trust you?

The approaches used to inform and work with the public, to be successful, must address these concerns in all parts of the community. First, the benefits from a well-run low-level waste site offer a significant economic package to the community that includes jobs and training programs, tax revenues, and local purchases of supplies and equipment. How these benefits are described and presented will affect the community's feelings about the facility. It is a mistake to think of "buying off" the community, a feeling that seems to be created by the concept of direct incentive payments, so the facility prospectus must be communicated in ways that are sensitive to local concerns. There are also non-economic advantages accompanying new industrial development of this type that contribute to the community's well-being. Such indirect activities as civic participation, sharing of skills in first aid or emergency response, or education programs all help to make the operation a contributing partner in the community. These concepts need to be clearly communicated as well.

A major concern is whether or not there will be damaging aspects of the operation in the near or distant future. Health and safety are fundamental concerns. Preconceived beliefs about the inadequacy of governmental regulations and the attitudes of "big business" when it comes to spending money on safety can be damaging. It is the responsibility of the site developer to create a sufficient level of public comfort with the technical and regulatory safeguards, the basis for the regulations and the surety of enforcement, and their own track record in the field. The industry has learned from the problems in the past, and today there are answers for the difficult questions. There is also a new set of regulations in 10 CFR Part 61 that went through a great deal of public review and comment, and which seem to be well accepted in most cases. The technical requirements can be met and can be satisfactorily brought across to the public. It is important to target the audiences correctly and make sure that they have ample opportunity to ask the questions and hear the answers.

Another critical concern involves credibility and trust. The technical framework for safe waste disposal is in place, but the developer of a specific site must create the image in that particular community that will provide for a successful project. It is always difficult to accept the fact that even if all the technical and licensing requirements are satisfied, the project can be stopped for other reasons. The fact is, of course, that it can be delayed, cancelled, or thrown into court on issues that bear little relationship to the site's technical suitability. The approach to the community should stress the assurances provided in the license for financial and operating accountability, the qualities of the firm's historic operating record, and the openness of the firm in dealing with its host communities elsewhere. Frequent contact with the community by a consistent team of company representatives helps build trust, and provides for informing the community piece-by-piece (e.g., a focus one time on waste handling, another on transportation routing). Developing that credibility from the beginning of the siting process should carry over into operations with an open, outgoing policy of dealing with the host community.

This approach means planning early in the project timeline; it requires people and resources and a commitment to doing what is necessary to maintain control. It also takes willingness to be flexible and adaptive as the program proceeds, making changes in methods as the project's progress indicates.

Timing when you choose to begin the public acceptance program is a critical decision in the process. This past year in Colorado, Chem-Nuclear has had an opportunity to carry out a siting approach for a low-level waste site. That experience has confirmed that it is beneficial and in fact necessary to begin planning as soon as a potential site area is identified. Proper planning and research will ensure that you are prepared to actually go public with your targeted groups and individuals as soon as you identify a specific site. As an example, in Colorado the first public meeting was held the day the land option was finalized and the drill rigs moved onsite. By that meeting, local residents already knew how many drill rigs were on the property and how many out-of-towners were eating at the local coffee shop.

The planning process must begin with careful research on the characteristics of the community. The initial assessment should be a part of the site selection process itself. Technical site selection factors should be integrated with socioeconomic criteria to identify candidate sites and select a preferred site. A particular factor to be researched is the area's historical response to industrial development. That background also helps in identifying local leaders, assessing the kinds of concerns that the people have and anticipating their viewpoint as groups and individuals to this type of project.

You also need time to develop basic informational materials, because the initial demand for information on the project can be surprisingly large and wide-ranging. Failing to be open with the community early in the game will create resentment and charges of secrecy later, causing damage to credibility that may not be recoverable. It is impossible to have the answers to all of the questions when you begin talking with the community so early in the process, but the lack of answers is explainable and can serve as a chance to prove that the appropriate follow up will be provided. A key point to remember is that there is nothing wrong with an "I don't know" response.

In Colorado, Chem-Nuclear did a great deal of groundwork with individuals while the feasibility of developing the site was being assessed, but the team was careful to make public statements as soon as there was something to tell the community. Public contacts took the form of many one-on-one briefings, frequent small group presentations to groups such as the Lions Club and fire department, and numerous larger public meetings. At the same time the the team was meeting informally with licensing agencies, political leaders, and statewide public interest groups. A concentrated tour of media in the state focused on the area within 200 miles, and representatives met with radio, television and newspaper editorial staffs and left comprehensive information packets.

The materials that were developed for use in the community included a set of fact sheets on facility design, employment and training, operating procedures, and various other aspects of the project. They were simply produced and done individually so new subjects can be added as the project proceeds, and have been used as mailers, as handouts at public meetings, and for briefing groups and individuals in some detail. A business plan was developed which discussed the economics of the market, the capital and operating costs, and the benefits to the community. In developing all public materials care is taken to write them in non-technical language but in varying levels of detail to match the different levels of interest in the area. Also avoided are slick brochures with expensive color photos or art, which are seen in a primarily rural area as snow jobs.

Slide presentations have proven to be very effective in providing a "walk-through" feeling for describing how a site operates. Their primary benefit is to give an accurate mental image of the proposed project to as many local residents as possible. The presentations are relatively informal and tailored to each particular audience, and are always used to supplement spoken presentations. In all cases the descriptions of the company's background and the proposed project concept generated many questions which were often handled by setting up workshop-type information centers and encouraging attendees to circulate and discuss their questions informally. Some people, however, prefer to write their questions and receive written responses. It is extremely important to follow up on each individual inquiry to ensure they receive a satisfactory answer.

Another technique that has been very useful is taking a limited number of local residents on a tour of the Chem-Nuclear facility at Barnwell. Groups of both community-growth supporters and those in opposition have been taken for comprehensive tours of the facility, opportunities to meet with local leaders and residents, and discussions with South Carolina regulators. Time was included for impromptu conversations with local business people and opportunities to ask questions about the effects of the facility on the local economy, tourism, and the general quality of life. The results were good. Even the opponents reported to those back home that they were impressed with the site operations; the primary concern that remained is not wanting a site "in my back yard". Their eye-witness accounts of how a site operates closely parallel the slide presentations, which adds to the credibility of the project.

The differentiation between the hands-on project team and use of staff or consultants who are strictly public relations oriented is an important one. People representing the company, whether staff or consultants, must be extremely familiar with all aspects of the project day to day. They must be able to answer questions or have direct access to someone who can, and must be involved in technical and regulatory activities at all times. Anything less will be quickly perceived negatively by the public, and they are also sensitive to a lack of continuity in the project team. When it is necessary to involve new players, they are always introduced and accompanied by familiar faces to create and maintain good working relationships.

SUMMARY

Building a strong network of informed support in a community that stands to benefit from the operation is key to successful siting. Of course, the site must be technically acceptable, the state or federal regulators must approve the applications for permits and licenses, and the engineering and design must be appropriate for the conditions. It is also important that community members understand the stringent licensing requirements and are satisfied with the regulatory agencies' commitment to enforcement. Based on Chem-Nuclear's past and current experience with this strategy, it is clear that developing new sites in today's environment is not an insurmountable problem.