YOU DON'T KNOW UNTIL YOU ASK: USING COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS TO BUILD PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

Public participation faces a world of challenges as budgets shrink, stakeholders burn out, and agencies and organizations look for approaches that are cheaper, yield results faster, and still meet the spirit and the letter of the law. For many organizations involved in environmental clean-up and waste management, public meetings are the primary mechanism for exchanging information with the public. However, public meetings often are not well attended and can be dominated by a few vocal participants. Through community interviews, organizations can obtain input, convey information, and use stakeholders' advice in designing community involvement programs that meet the needs of organizations and communities.

This paper focuses on the validity and utility of community interviews as a means of building public participation in the environmental decision-making process. The paper presents diverse issues based upon case histories from various projects in different geographic settings. Applications covered in the paper range from a state-wide program involving the management of spent nuclear fuel to projects involving nuclear reactor decommissioning, selection of technologies for clean-up of a chemical waste landfill, and community interviews to determine preferences for broad-scale economic development activities. The authors share practical tips and advice on revitalizing a tried and true technique. The paper describes how to design and conduct community interviews as part of a public and community involvement program. The following questions are addressed:

- What are community interviews?
- How should they be designed?
- When is it best to do interviews and when shouldn't they be done?
- Who should be interviewed?
- How should the information obtained from interviews be used?

Included in the paper are benefits and advantages of conducting community interviews, guidelines on do's and don'ts—pitfalls and lessons learned, and how to evaluate the effectiveness of the interview process.

INTRODUCTION

Getting the public involved in decisions about environmental clean-up and waste management requires a delicate blend of art and science. Effective techniques and methods for facilitating two-way communication, education, and collaboration abound yet their application often falls short of the mark in the environmental arena. Requirements to involve the public in the environmental decision-making process are mandated by Federal laws such as the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), the

Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In general, these laws require organizations to notify the public about proposed actions that could potentially impact the environment and allow opportunities for public input and comments on the proposed plans. Many organizations, faced with schedule pressures, budget constraints, and shortage of community involvement expertise, rely solely on written comment periods and public meetings to fulfill this mandate. However, results are often disappointing. In many cases, meetings are poorly attended and comments are offered by a relatively small group of vocal stakeholders. These forums for public participation sometimes lead to combative, defensive, and reactionary responses, adding to frustrations and delays in the process. The level of public participation also suffers as stakeholders burn out from the multiple meetings, committees, and document reviews associated with environmental projects at various locations across the country. Despite these problems, many agencies and organizations realize that effective public participation not only satisfies legal mandates but can also enhance the quality of environmental management decisions and lead to broader acceptance of clean-up and waste management programs.

Staff from Vector Resources, Inc. and colleagues have used community interviews on several projects over the past several years as one way to address these challenges and increase the overall effectiveness of public participation efforts. This paper summarizes a few of these projects and describes how community interviews can be used as a means of building, sustaining, and improving public participation programs. The paper also includes lessons learned and pointers for incorporating interviews into community relations efforts on environmental projects.

COMMUNITY INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE

Community interviews have been used for years in a wide range of contexts and applications where input from local residents and the general public is desired. Issues as diverse as health care, education, crime, politics, community development, and the environment have been subjects of the interview process. Community interviews are a key method used in the development of community relations plans and activities for projects conducted under CERCLA. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandates interviews at all National Priority List (NPL) sites (1). These interviews are conducted as part of the development of each site's community relations plan. The interview process presented in this paper was developed using the EPA model. The interview methodology is based on a process used extensively in EPA's Superfund program. EPA uses this process to provide for full and thoughtful public participation in environmental decisions that may affect the public living near Superfund sites. The EPA interview process has been refined, updated, and revised for use in a broad range of applications based upon the practical experience of the authors.

Interviews normally consist of several open-ended questions to stimulate discussion on key topics. In the context of this paper, interviews are not to be confused with structured surveys and polls as they are not intended to be scientific or statistical methods of sampling public opinion. Instead, interviews are generally conducted as an informal means of establishing dialog with community members and gaining insight on issues and concerns for planning purposes. Community interviews form the basis of the design for subsequent public involvement activities. A basic premise for conducting the interviews is that you cannot really know what stakeholders' interests, concerns, and preferences are unless you ask. Getting input directly from stakeholders early in the planning process can be a key factor in designing effective community involvement programs that meet stakeholder needs. Interviews can also be a useful way of reaching out to a larger, more diverse segment of the community than typically participates in public meetings and comment periods.

Interviews are often conducted to develop community involvement activities, however they can be used for multiple purposes. The objectives of the interviews—why you are conducting them and how you plan to use the results—should be identified up front before the interview process begins. Also, it is important that the objectives of the interviews be communicated in clear and understandable terms to all parties involved in the process. Some of the common objectives for conducting interviews include the following:

- determine general issues of interest to the community
- identify information needs
- obtain advice from stakeholders on how to best design community involvement programs to meet identified needs and interests
- convey general information
- obtain preliminary input and ideas regarding proposed plans
- determine individual's interest in attending meetings or participating on task forces and committees
- seek assistance from community members on outreach and public awareness efforts
- identify additional stakeholders that may be interested in learning more or participating, and
- evaluate the effectiveness of community involvement programs, mid-course and at completion.

Benefits of Conducting Community Interviews

The advantages of using community interviews are manifold, especially when combined with other activities such as public meetings, task forces, and comment periods associated with environmental clean-up and waste management projects. One of the main advantages is an opportunity for project staff and stakeholders to meet with each other, one-on-one, in an informal setting. This allows each party to become acquainted with the other and to establish a basis for ongoing dialog on issues of interest. When conducted properly, interviews can be an important element in establishing rapport and building trust and confidence among community members and project staff. Even the request to set up an interview is seen as an expression of interest in what stakeholders have to say. Most stakeholders welcome the opportunity to share their views in an atmosphere that is not as formal as a public meeting. In some cases, particularly when elected officials and other community leaders are interviewed, they are much more willing to share their insights and concerns on an issue than they would be in a public setting.

Another advantage to conducting interviews is an opportunity to learn who the stakeholders are, what they are concerned about, and what kinds of information they may need on the subjects of interest. By obtaining this information directly from the public, the project staff can tailor information, outreach, and educational programs to meet the needs of community members without assuming what it is they want or need to know. Critical information on how to design the community involvement program can also be obtained from interviews. Stakeholders like to be consulted. They are generally eager to discuss their ideas and preferences on what kinds of meetings work best, when and where they should be held, what kinds of information and publications would be useful, and who else in the community might be interested in participating. Interviews can be a useful outreach technique to increase the level and diversity of stakeholder participation. When community interviews are used in this fashion, turnout at meetings is generally higher and more productive since stakeholders are part of the planning process, issues and concerns are brought up in advance, and information and meeting formats can be tailored to respond to specific stakeholder needs.

An important component of interviews should be the involvement of technical staff. Often, technical staff are leery of stakeholders and uncomfortable with public meetings. Involving technical staff at this level can promote active exchange of ideas, understanding of community needs, and result in better approaches to technical issues.

Case Histories

Case histories are provided for several projects that employed community interviews as an integral part of the public involvement activities. The applications range from a statewide effort pertaining to the management of spent nuclear fuel to projects involving nuclear reactor decommissioning, selection of technologies for clean-up of a chemical waste landfill, and development of a plan to increase economic development in a small community.

Statewide Community Involvement Program on Spent Nuclear Fuel

The first case history is a statewide community involvement program that was conducted under a cooperative agreement between United States Department of Energy (DOE) and the Medical University of South Carolina. The purpose of this project was to obtain public input and foster dialog on the subject of DOE-owned spent nuclear fuel in South Carolina. The scope of the project included the potential receipt of spent nuclear fuel from foreign research reactors, the transportation of spent fuel across the state, and the storage and management of spent fuel at the DOE Savannah River Site in Aiken, South Carolina.

This project spanned nearly one year. After developing the project management plan and completing an initial data collection effort, the project team designed a community involvement program that began with individual interviews with local community leaders across the state, followed by a series of interactive community forums in the same locations. The information obtained during the interview process was used to design the remainder of the project. A variety of outreach and public involvement techniques, many of them suggested by interviewees, were used to facilitate the process. The approach used on this project differed in several significant aspects from typical public participation activities:

- The project was not mandated to follow specific public participation requirements as outlined in various laws and regulations. This allowed greater flexibility in approach, scope, and timing of community involvement activities.

- The project was not tied to any specific action, set of alternatives, or problem definition, and consequently could elicit input from participants on a broad range of issues related to spent nuclear fuel. The project team maintained a neutral position regarding the management of spent nuclear fuel and did not advocate one position or viewpoint over another.

- By identifying public information needs up front as part of the interview process, the project team was able to tailor information to specific needs rather than pre-determining a set of technical facts that the public may not need or want to know.

- The design of the project provided a mechanism for ongoing dialog and deliberation through a series of community involvement activities rather than a one-time information session or comment period.

- The nature of the project (community interviews and forums) provided the opportunity to receive input from a diverse group of South Carolina residents. Many of the participants had not been involved in other previous public participation activities on this subject.

- The community interview portion of the project involved face-to-face meetings with interviewees at locations, which they suggested. This approach allowed interviewees to discuss their ideas, thoughts, and concerns in a non-threatening, familiar setting. In addition, the confidentiality of the individual interviews allowed for greater interaction and participation by the interviewees.

A total of 146 community interviews were conducted in six areas of the state—Aiken, Beaufort-Hilton Head, Charleston, Columbia, Florence, and Greenville, South Carolina. A series of open-ended questions was asked regarding DOE-owned spent nuclear fuel and suggestions for the design of the next phase of the community involvement activities. In each location, community leaders were interviewed. Community leaders consisted of elected and appointed government officials, health and safety professionals, law enforcement personnel, educators, health care providers, clergy, and representatives from civic organizations, businesses, neighborhood associations, and special interest groups. In most cases, the community leaders had constituencies, were active in their communities, and could be considered opinion leaders. Each individual interviewed was asked to recommend others who should be included. The community interviews were not designed to be a statistically significant sampling, but rather a means to gain a broad-brush picture of sentiments around the state. The interviews were conducted to obtain input from participants rather than to disseminate information.

In each community, every effort was made to obtain input from residents in the major populations centers as well as the small rural communities located near each city. The six areas of the state that were included in the project were selected in order to provide a broad geographic representation of the state. One of the areas was located near the Savannah River Site where the spent nuclear fuel would be stored, one was down stream from the site, one was the state capital and base for several stakeholder groups, and all were close to potential transportation routes on which the spent nuclear fuel could be carried.

The project's community involvement staff developed a pool of candidate interviewees with the objective of obtaining a broad, cross section of South Carolina residents. The team began by collecting mailing lists of potentially interested individuals provided by project sponsors at DOE and the Medical University. Lists of elected and appointed government officials were also obtained for each community. The community involvement team prepared talking points and guidelines for use in contacting the individuals to briefly describe the project and schedule interviews. The initial contacts were made by telephone and coordinated with interview teams set up by geographic location.

Before beginning the interview process, lead staff on the community involvement team conducted a training program on community relations and interview techniques for all project staff. The training program included reading assignments and a day-long training session. Included were several interactive segments in which participants practiced listening skills, interviewing, problem-solving, and role playing. Team leaders were assigned for each of the six geographic locations with responsibilities for scheduling and conducting interviews, supervising staff and logistics, and developing summaries of interview results and findings.

The interviews generally took between 45 minutes and an hour. Each interview was conducted by two members of the project team, usually a community relations specialist and one of the technical staff from the project. A consistent set of open-ended questions was used for the interviews; however questions were presented in a conversational manner rather than being read. During each interview session, the lead interviewer asked the questions and was supported by an assistant who asked clarifying questions and took notes on the interview responses. Staff meetings and debriefings on interview results were conducted daily in each location and discussed with the community involvement lead staff and project manager.

Summaries of issues and observations were developed for each location, along with identified information needs and recommendations for subsequent community involvement activities. The report on interview findings was sent to interviewees as well as project sponsors and other interested parties.

Based on results obtained from the statewide interviews, the project team designed follow-up activities including community forums in each location where interviews were conducted. Over 90 percent of the individuals interviewed indicated an interest in the program and a willingness to attend and participate in the community forums. Many of the interviewees agreed to help coordinate follow-on community involvement activities in their communities. Most of those interviewed suggested other individuals who might also want to participate. The community forums, which were open to the public, were designed to provide an opportunity for interactive discussions and information exchange on the subject of spent nuclear fuel, focusing on the topics and issues of interest to each community. A total of 242 individuals participated in the community forums, not including staff associated with the project. Based on interview findings, the project team also developed several informational materials tailored to stakeholder interests. These materials included a portable exhibit, fact sheets, a glossary, and answers to frequently asked questions on DOE-owned spent nuclear fuel. In addition to the community forums, the project team sponsored a special forum and interactive roundtable meeting known as a Socratic dialog on spent nuclear fuel and other environmental issues for university students in the state.

Selection of Remediation Technologies at a Chemical Waste Landfill

Interviews were also used as a tool for designing and evaluating the effectiveness of a project on risk assessment and risk communication that was conducted under a cooperative agreement with the DOE Office of Environmental Management, Office of Science and Technology.

This project entailed the development and demonstration of a methodology incorporating risk assessment and decision analysis tools with interactive stakeholder participation to evaluate and rank remedial action alternatives for the clean-up of a contaminated site. The project was accomplished by forming a working group of stakeholders who assisted in the development and demonstration of a prototype decision methodology. The prototype focused on a test case involving the clean-up of a chemical waste landfill at Sandia National Laboratories. Candidate technologies for remediating the site were evaluated based on analysis and deliberation of risks and impacts that stakeholders considered important. The decision methodology assessed impacts in a number of categories including environment, health and safety, cultural and historic resources, socioeconomic issues including economic impacts and environmental justice considerations, life-cycle costs, and a variety of programmatic issues. The stakeholder working group met four times over an eight-month period to develop and test the prototype decision methodology. During the course of these meetings, participants developed and defined the impact categories to be evaluated, determined the relative importance of these categories on an individual basis, agreed on a combination of quantitative and qualitative performance measures in each impact category, and discussed preferred clean-up methods based on the risk assessment results.

Potential project participants were identified through discussions with project sponsors, a review of existing documents on public involvement activities at the site, and a series of interviews with individuals in the local area. Based on input from all sources, the project team compiled a list of prospective participants and contacted the individuals identified. Participation on the stakeholder working group was determined based on each individual's interest and ability to commit the time required.

This project did not attempt to involve a comprehensive group of stakeholders. The intent was to develop the decision methodology by consulting with a small, representative group of stakeholders through a series of interactive working sessions. The stakeholder working group was composed of individuals who represented a broad range of interests and backgrounds including: county health department, state department of environmental health, DOE, Pueblo of Isleta, realtor, city economic development agency, Council of Governments, members of existing stakeholder groups formed by Sandia National Laboratories (Citizens Advisory Board (CAB) and Corrective Action Management Unit (CAMU) Working Group), site contractors, and Sandia National Laboratories.

Several innovative features were incorporated to ensure that stakeholders felt a part of the process and stayed actively involved throughout the project's duration. Particular attention was paid to establishing an atmosphere that allowed the stakeholders to freely express their thoughts, ideas, and concerns. An equally important consideration was establishing a true partnership among all participants. A combination of interactive meetings and informal one-on-one interviews was used in this regard. Three sets of interviews were conducted during the project. The communication and feedback process enabled by the interviews was very important to maintaining stakeholder participation throughout the lengthy prototype demonstration.

The first round of interviews was conducted at the beginning of the project, following a review of background information. As part of the planning process, the community involvement team interviewed 27 potential project participants. The purpose of the interviews was to receive input on the planning process and to identify stakeholders who were interested and willing to participate in the development of the prototype methodology. During the interviews, the community involvement staff provided a brief overview of the project; obtained suggestions on the best ways to involve stakeholders including ideas for meeting formats, scheduling, and locations; determined the individual's interest in serving on the working group; learned of other people who might also be interested in participating; and identified information needs and issues to consider in designing the stakeholder involvement program.

Interviews were scheduled in advance and conducted either by telephone or in person. A consistent set of questions was asked of all interviewees. The interviews lasted about one hour. Based on input obtained from the interview process, the project staff designed a series of interactive working group meetings and developed informational materials to help stakeholders participate effectively in the project. Information materials included a project fact sheet, background summaries, briefing materials, a glossary, and meeting summaries.

A second round of interviews was conducted so that members of the stakeholder working group could have the opportunity to provide input to the project team at about the midpoint in the project schedule. As in the first round, the interviews consisted of several open-ended questions to encourage discussion. The goals of this round of interviews were to:

- determine what had worked and what had not worked so far
- discuss the proposed additional meetings
- demonstrate interest in participants' attitudes toward the project
- clarify issues and information needs
- respond to feedback from working group members, and

- obtain input from participants on the design of the remaining sessions.

Information obtained from these interviews was summarized and provided as feedback to the entire project team. This information was used to develop mid-course corrections and to design subsequent stakeholder involvement activities on the project.

A third and final round of interviews was conducted toward the conclusion of the project. The primary purpose for this round of interviews was to obtain input from participants on the overall effectiveness of the project. Topics of discussion included an evaluation of the process used, lessons learned, potential future applications, and suggestions for modifications to the project approach. Interviewees offered insights on why they had participated in the project and what they had gained from the process. They also commented on the effectiveness of the informational materials and meetings and offered suggestions on how to enhance participation in similar projects and community involvement activities. One of the key findings from the project indicated that stakeholders generally had more confidence in the risk assessment methodology and the selection of clean-up technologies based on the use of that methodology because they had been involved in the decision-making process from start to finish.

End State Determination Process on Reactor Decommissioning Project

The third case history shows how community interviews were used in the initial planning phase for a stakeholder involvement program associated with the decommissioning of the Brookhaven Graphite Research Reactor at the Brookhaven National Laboratory. On this project, the objectives of the interviews were to inform stakeholders of a new initiative to decommission the reactor and to elicit their input on the design of a community involvement program for the multi-year initiative.

Although many environmental clean-up projects were planned or underway at the site, this project represented the first decommissioning effort at the site. As a result, many people were not aware of the planned project and many had differing views and understandings on what decommissioning would entail. Adding to the challenge was the fact that the reactor facilities had not yet been fully characterized and their end state, i.e., their physical state and condition following decommissioning, had not yet been determined. Decommissioning on this project would be performed as a series of removal actions under CERCLA. As such, the end state would be determined as the removal actions were completed over a five-year period, culminating in a final Record of Decision. Also, the research reactor, which had not operated for 30 years, was found to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places due to the significance of its contributions to nuclear science. This added yet another dimension to the end state determination process. The project sponsors at DOE and Brookhaven National Laboratory decided to develop a proactive community involvement program for the decommissioning project. This community involvement program would go beyond the minimum requirements for public participation specified in CERCLA and involve stakeholders in early and ongoing dialog about the decommissioning.

Approximately 25 interviews were conducted over a two-week period in the very early planning stages of the community involvement program. Interviews were combined with project briefings for some of the elected officials who were contacted. Efforts were made to include a broad, diverse group of stakeholders including state and local elected officials, members of the site Community Advisory Council, site employees and contractors, health and safety professionals, area businesses and residents, and members of community and civic groups in the area. All of the stakeholders interviewed on this project had been previously involved in public participation activities dealing with environmental issues at the site. Most of the stakeholder interviews were conducted in-person, usually at the interviewee's office, and were completed in about one hour. The interview process consisted of a brief overview of the project followed by a few general questions to determine the initial issues that the community was interested in, ideas for conducting a series of roundtable meetings to further discuss these issues, and what kinds of information people needed to participate in the roundtables.

The community involvement staff provided the project team and project sponsors with a summary of interview findings and also used this input to design a stakeholder involvement program tailored to identified needs.

Roundtable meetings in the community were one of the techniques used to foster two-way communication between the project staff and stakeholders. The roundtable meetings were designed as facilitated small group meetings to encourage discussion and interaction among the attendees. During the first round of meetings, an overview of decommissioning was provided and stakeholders developed a set of community values and expectations for the decommissioning project. During the second round of meetings, more details were provided on the various alternatives and approaches for conducting the removal actions that would define the end state of the reactor facility. A method for screening the alternatives was also discussed along with opportunities for public comment and input throughout the project duration.

Roundtable participants included members of the site Community Advisory Council, civic organizations, environmental groups, representatives of regulatory agencies and elected officials, Laboratory employees, businesses, the general public, and DOE officials representing the Office of Science and the Office of Environmental Management. Not including individuals associated with the project, 56 people participated in the first roundtable and 42 people participated in the second.

Several activities were undertaken to address the informational needs expressed by stakeholders. The community involvement staff developed a website on the decommissioning project and offered facility tours and information availability sessions. Decommissioning was also featured in the site newsletter on environmental restoration activities. Several project briefings and meetings have also been conducted to address stakeholder interests in this project.

Community Development Interviews

The last case history shows how community interviews were used to determine preferences for broad-scale economic development activities in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Carlsbad is a small community located near the DOE Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), an underground repository for the permanent disposal of defense-related nuclear waste.

Leadership, local government, and development function more or less invisibly in most communities. That is, as long as no one raises concerns or objections, the business of being a community is ignored by the majority of the populace. From time to time, however, the leaders in any community will find themselves challenged and criticized, even though they are doing business as they always have. It may be because a particular action attracts the attention of local people (sometimes only a few people, sometimes many) who have the energy and time to raise the public consciousness. Or the local newspaper may uncover some controversy where none seemed to exist previously. How it happens is not so important as how the leadership deals with it.

The City of Carlsbad, New Mexico found itself in that position in the first half of 1999 and underwent a rather contentious pro-con campaign over the sale of the community civic center building. The campaign fostered a healthy level of community involvement on both sides. The community rescinded the sale of the civic center in a public referendum on July 20, 1999 and out of that vote came new mechanisms for cooperation and community involvement for the area.

The impetus for the community interviews was the City of Carlsbad's decision to sell the civic center and the subsequent community referendum. At the same time, the Carlsbad Department of Development was attempting to renew activities for progressive riverfront development. The interviews were designed to elicit community concerns, insights, and ideas related to public participation in local economic development projects. The interviewers conducted discussions with community members using the questions as prompts in a flowing conversation focused on each interviewee's particular areas of interest and expertise.

The Carlsbad Department of Development and Chamber of Commerce identified the categories of people to be interviewed and suggested some names. Interviewees were selected from a broad list of community leaders, business people, retirees, and participants in the range of activities that would be involved in riverfront development (such as tennis players, golfers, etc.)—people who very likely would have knowledge of and opinions about riverfront development and public involvement. Some interviewees were well acquainted with the history of the civic center; others were involved with current activities related to the planned sale of the facility; and others had significant experience in local economic development to share. The interview format was deliberately flexible to allow an in-depth discussion of the interviewees' unique knowledge and insights.

The interviews consisted of a group of open-ended questions designed to obtain as much information as possible concerning the interviewees' thoughts and opinions about the civic center sale, community issues of concern, recommendations for future development, and the level that each individual would like to be involved in the process. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and was conducted by a trained interviewer and note-taker, so that the lead person didn't have to slow down the process to take notes, and the note-taker could concentrate on taking good notes.

The project team interviewed 60 individuals representing a broad spectrum of the community. The interviewees included individuals involved in agriculture, the business community, economic development interests, elected and appointed officials, hotel/motel/tourism/recreation industries, the medical community, members of organizations, ministers, minority group representatives, retirees, professionals involved in schools and education, user and community groups, and individuals associated with the DOE Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.

POINTERS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Based on our experience and lessons learned, we have developed some general guidelines on how to design and implement interviews to achieve optimum results. Following is a summary of these guidelines including pointers on the do's and don'ts of the interview process, how to avoid common problems and pitfalls, and how to assess whether or not your interview process has been effective.

Objectives and Timing of Interviews

<u>When Should Interviews Be Used?</u> There are many good opportunities to use interviews as an effective component of a community involvement program dealing with environmental clean-up and waste management issues. Interviews are not intended to replace the public participation activities required by law. However, they can be used in conjunction with these activities to build, sustain, and improve community involvement programs.

As mentioned above, the objectives of the interviews—why you are conducting them and how you plan to use the results—should be clearly identified up front before the process begins. When decided, these objectives can determine what kinds of questions to include in the interviews, who should be interviewed, and when interviews should be conducted.

Interviews can be highly effective as a means of planning stakeholder involvement and community relations programs. It is best to conduct the interviews at the beginning of a new environmental project or clean-up initiative and to continue the interviews on some ongoing basis. When interviews are conducted at the mid-point of a project and again at the end, useful information can be gained on the overall success of community involvement activities as well as ways to improve. Interviews may also be a useful means of expanding community involvement and sustaining it over the long-term. This technique can be combined with outreach efforts to increase awareness and participation levels and to get a broad, diverse representation of the community involved.

It is important to coordinate community interviews with project sponsors and other organizations involved in stakeholder interactions so that scheduling does not interfere with other planned activities.

Interviews should not be used if the sponsoring organization is reluctant or unwilling to adjust its plans or programs based upon the results of the interviews. If you ask the community for input, you should be willing and able to implement, change, or re-direct activities based upon the response obtained. Interviews will be counterproductive in situations where decisions are already made or plans are already in the process of being implemented. Great care should be taken when designing interview programs to determine how and when interview findings will be used. Members of the public who participate in interviews need to know up front in the process how they can be involved and how their concerns will be addressed.

The Interview Process

<u>Who Should Design and Conduct the Interviews?</u> The interview process should be designed by skilled and experienced community relations staff. In developing the interview design and plans, the community relations staff should work closely with project sponsors and members of the environmental project staff to agree on strategies, objectives, scope, and focus of the interviews. Some project sponsors may be uncomfortable with the idea that members of the project team are having "offline" discussions with stakeholders. Make sure that everyone understands the objectives and value of the interview process up front, as well as the potential risks and down sides of getting out in the public eye early on.

In some highly charged, complex situations, having technical staff attend interviews can be a real benefit to the process. This allows direct response to technical questions and gives technical staff the benefit of hearing concerns first hand.

Two-person interview teams are recommended. Although it is possible for one person to conduct the interview, results are not optimal since it is difficult to singlehandedly ask questions, listen, facilitate discussion, and record key input. At the other extreme, more than two interviewers is not necessary and can be intimidating to the interviewee. When two-person teams are used, one person should serve as the lead interviewer, directing most of the questions and discussion. The other should primarily act as a note-taker, but can also ask clarifying questions if needed.

<u>Who Should Be Interviewed?</u> Depending on the objectives of the interview process, it is generally best to interview a broad, diverse group of stakeholders. Lists of stakeholders are usually available from community relations organizations associated with a project or site. Other sources of potential interviewees can be drawn from listings of state and local elected officials, directories of civic and community organizations, environmental and special interest groups, and other community leaders. Interviewees can also be asked to identify other people who may be interested in participating. If interviews are being directed to a large number of individuals in a particular community, or if the planned environmental project associated with the interviews is high profile or controversial, it is wise to begin the interview process with elected officials. This allows the project team to give the officials advance notice that interviews are planned and that input from the community is important. Elected officials can also be asked to suggest others who should be included in the process. Finally, it is always a good idea to interview some of the internal stakeholders including project sponsors and onsite organizations to gain insights and perspectives that are useful in project planning and execution.

<u>Where Should Interviews Be Conducted?</u> Interviews should be conducted in person whenever possible. When scheduling the interview, the project team should ask the stakeholders to suggest a convenient meeting place. The interviews are generally more successful when they are held in locations that are familiar to the stakeholders. Examples of good locations to meet include the

stakeholder's home or office, a library, or community center. As a second choice, the interviews can be held in the offices of the project staff or at a meeting facility located on the project site.

What Kinds of Questions Should Be Asked? Depending on the objectives that are selected for the process, the best interview questions are usually open-ended, very general questions with no right or wrong answers, and not requiring a simple yes or no response. Examples of open-ended interview questions include the following:

- Have you heard anything about plans to clean up the XYZ site? If yes, what have you heard?
- In your opinion, what are some of the most important things to consider when cleaning up a contaminated site?
- Are you interested in more information about the XYZ site? What are your suggestions on the best way to present this information?
- What is the best way in X community to involve people?
- What kind of information in what format would be helpful to you?
- Can you suggest other people who might be interested in this project?

Typically, interviews are used to gather information from stakeholders about their interests, concerns, information needs, and suggestions. Because of this, it is not necessary for the project staff who conduct the interviews to provide more than basic, general information about the project. If technical or detailed questions are asked by the stakeholders during the interview sessions, the interviewers should record the questions and indicate that they will be provided to the project team for subsequent response.

During the interviews, it is important to listen to what stakeholders say and take adequate notes on key points discussed. Interviewers should maintain a neutral position, not agreeing or disagreeing with comments offered by the stakeholders. The interview team should thank the stakeholder for participating in the interview and indicate how the information provided in the interviews will be used. Information regarding the timeframe for follow-up or next steps should be presented during the interview as well. It is also a good idea to leave the interviewee with brief written information on the project and a point of contact for further information.

How Should the Information Obtained from Interviews Be Used? As indicated above, the purpose of the interviews should be decided early in the planning phase. It is important to use the information obtained from interviews as planned. Unless the interviews are conducted solely to gauge general interest or opinions on an issue, project teams should avoid asking for stakeholders' input, suggestions, and needs just for the sake of asking. Input obtained from the interviews can be used to design effective strategies for involving stakeholders. It can also be used to develop informational materials to address identified areas of interest.

Decisions about the confidentiality of information provided during the interviews should be addressed and resolved with project staff and sponsors before interviews begin. As a general rule, the confidentiality of the stakeholders should be protected and stakeholders should be advised of this fact at the beginning of the interviews. Confidentiality does not necessarily mean that one cannot disclose the names of the stakeholders who were interviewed. It does mean that specific comments and opinions expressed during the interviews should not be attributed to specific individuals. When this policy is affected, stakeholders are often not as reserved in offering comments and suggestions.

Interview findings and results should be compiled, analyzed, and documented in a summary report. The project team should share the summary of interview findings with the people who were interviewed as well as other stakeholders who participate in follow-on activities and meetings associated with the project. Feedback on interview results and findings can be provided through mailings and at meetings. All follow-up from the interviews should be conducted in a timely manner. The key here is to ensure that if people take the time to be interviewed, that they receive the results of the interviews and information on how the public involvement has been shaped based upon their input.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Community Interviews

Qualitative improvements in public involvement activities can result when community interviews are used effectively. It is always important to include evaluation measures when designing community interviews. Be sure to ask all participants in the interview process for feedback on how well the process worked as well as ideas to improve the process in the future. Also, look at the role and impact of community interviews when assessing the overall success of community relations activities at large.

CONCLUSION

Interviews are a vital component of a proactive community involvement process. Although community interviews do not replace the public involvement activities required by law, they can be a highly effective complement to these activities and improve their overall success. Often, decisions are made based on assumptions about community sentiment without ever asking community members for their opinions and suggestions. Many times, technical staff believe that stakeholders think a certain way, and then make a decision about an approach based upon that false assumption. Interviews allow stakeholders to freely express their opinions, learn more about the decision-making process, and determine how and when they want to be involved. Interviews can promote and enhance two-way communication and understanding about environmental clean-up and waste management issues, leading to decisions that are better informed and more reflective of community interests and input. You simply have to ask to know.

REFERENCES

(1) U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Community Relations in Superfund: A Handbook*, Office of Emergency and Remedial Response, Washington, D.C. EPA/540/R-92/009, (1992).