

EARLY PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN FEDERAL WATER RESOURCE PROJECTS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Recognizing that the development of a public participation plan calls for time and effort on the part of federal agencies, it is maintained that developing a productive relationship between the agency and private citizens in the early planning stages can result not only in better projects but also in public support for the resulting projects.

A case study approach is used to describe how and when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (in its Tucson Urban Study) has achieved positive results in dealing with an active public in a community where water resource issues evoke extensive public controversy.

It is critical to the success of this early, productive relationship that an agency identifies the public's role in the planning process. Clarifying the agency's expectations of the public, by defining what decisions can be made by citizens, results in public willingness to participate and lays the groundwork for meeting federal public involvement requirements in later stages of the planning effort.

How the interested publics were identified, brought together, and organized into an Urban Study-oriented mechanism for public participation and approach taken to resolve conflicting preferences between local governments and the public are described.

BACKGROUND

THE URBAN STUDIES PROGRAM

An urban study is a federally sponsored program that identifies a range of water resource plans addressing water-related problems in an identified urban area.

At the request of local governments, urban studies are authorized by the U.S. Congress and carried out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Congressional authority for the Urban Studies Program was established in 1974.

A three-stage planning process, taking from 36 to 48 months, results in recommended plans developed in sufficient detail to be adopted and carried out by local governmental agencies or by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers if a federal interest has been identified. Corps planning objectives state that the recommended plans, or solutions, must be socially and environmentally acceptable, have local support, and be implementable. Other important aspects of the Urban Studies Program are that the efforts recommended not duplicate existing local or regional planning activities and that the overall study be consistent with local, regional, State and Federal objectives.

Since 1974, about 36 urban studies have been authorized by Congress.

THE TUCSON URBAN STUDY

The Urban Study for the metropolitan area of Tucson, Arizona, was officially initiated in February 1978. Prior to the initiation announcement, the Pima Association of Governments passed a Resolution petitioning Congress to authorize and appropriate funds for the study (April 1976); the U.S. House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Public Works and Transportation approved the study (May 1977); and President Carter signed the bill authorizing the study (August 1977).

Conducted by the Urban Study Section of the Los Angeles District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Tucson Urban Study is managed locally in Tucson by a Study Manager, an Assistant Study

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Stage 1, the development of a Plan of Study, has been completed and a Plan of Study document, telling what the study will do and how it will be conducted, has been reviewed and approved by elected officials of all local governments in Pima County, and by the interested Federal and State agencies.

Major problems being addressed in the study are: 1) flooding along and degradation of the area's watercourses, and 2) depletion of the area's natural water supply.

CORPS REQUIREMENTS, STAGE 1, PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

According to the Corps' requirements for the Plan of Study document, there should be, at a minimum, a study initiation announcement, the development of a public participation plan for Stages 2 and 3, and a public meeting to present and hear public responses to the Plan of Study. The Corps also identifies an overall goal for public involvement as the establishment of continuous two-way communication between the Corps and the public throughout the life of the study. Later, during Stages 2 and 3, it is expected that the Corps will work with a body of informed people, known as the "participating public," while conducting the Tucson Urban Study. This group assists in tradeoff analysis by assessing impacts and evaluating effects of developed alternative solutions to water resource problems identified in the Plan of Study. The Corps' definition of "public" is any non-Corps entity and, therefore, includes local, regional, State, and Federal governmental agencies as well as organized interest groups, community associations, and any interested individuals. The use of the word "public" in the following sections refers to citizens acting on their own beliefs, not as representatives of governmental agencies.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IDENTIFIED AT BEGINNING OF STAGE 1

The Corps set out to learn whether the public in eastern Pima County was interested in the subjects to be addressed in the Tucson Urban Study and, if so, what aspects were of greatest concern, and how much was the public willing to be involved during development of the Plan of Study.

Information on the Tucson Urban Study provided by the Corps at the beginning of Stage 1 took the form of a Study Initiation Announcement mailed to 4,500 individuals in December 1977. A mailing list developed by the 208 Water Quality staff of the Pima Association of Governments was used. A broad cross-section of community interests was represented on the list, including environmental, business, construction, and civic groups, as well as governmental agencies at the local, regional, and State levels. The initiation of the study was also announced through television and newspapers.

From responses to this announcement and informal discussion with individuals and representatives of community organizations, it was learned that there was significant public interest in the Corps' Urban Study. Over 200 people contacted the Urban Study office by mail or phone to tell the Corps what kinds of problems should be addressed and what aspects of water resource planning should be emphasized. Many of these people, fearing a traditional construction-oriented approach by the Corps, expressed uneasiness at the Corps' presence in Tucson. However, they were also willing to learn more about the urban study concept and asked to be kept informed of study progress.

The Corps also learned, through means of clipping and reading the area's newspaper and attendance at meetings of local governments, that a vocal and active public appeared to represent a variety of conflicting opinions, values, and goals on water-related issues.

Finally, the Corps needed to gauge how much the public was willing to be involved. This was accomplished by learning about other mandated public involvement programs and evaluating their effectiveness. This was not attempted in a formal way but through observation and personal contacts with members of the public and with agency staff responsible for conducting other public participation programs. It was known that a variety of public involvement activities competed for the public's attention. In Pima County and the City of Tucson, there were, in 1977, over 60 active citizen boards, commissions, and committees in existence. Numerous other local, regional, State, and Federal agency programs required public attention and involvement on a regular basis. It appeared that the public perceived that most of these public participation programs were token gestures designed to fulfill the agencies' legal requirements. Often, it was not clear to the public exactly what was expected of them. Also, individuals were skeptical about how their responses or participation would affect decisions being made.

From this general, informal survey of the community, the Corps concluded that:

1. The public expected to be listened to and to have influence on decisions made during the Urban Study planning process.
2. The Corps must achieve a genuine openness from the start. It was not enough to contrive to be open or be patronizing.

3. The Corps' expectations of the public must be clearly defined.

The following objectives for the public involvement program of Stage 1, Plan of Study Development, were established as a result:

1. Provide detailed information on the scope of the study.
2. Encourage involvement of any interested individuals or organized groups.
3. Provide opportunities for public discussion of preferences on the identified parts of the Plan of Study.
4. Analyze public preferences and report decisions made based on public response.
5. Resolve any remaining conflicting issues between the participating public and local governments.

DEFINING THE PUBLIC ROLE

If the Corps was to avoid the pitfall of confusing and frustrating potential participants in Urban Study activities, it appeared that the public should be brought into the planning process as soon as possible. Therefore, meeting the Corps' requirement of presenting the draft Plan of Study at a public meeting was identified not as the first formal public involvement activity but as the last step in a public involvement process for Stage 1.

Based on what was known about public dissatisfaction with citizen involvement programs, the Corps determined that defining the role of the public was the major task to be addressed in Stage 1.

DECISION-MAKING OR ADVISORY

Consideration of the concept of a decision-making role for the public was acceptable to the Corps. While most urban studies had described the general public's role as advisory (review and comment), early contacts with representatives of special interest groups and community organizations in the Tucson area revealed a strong desire to have a responsible, informed, decision-making role for citizens during the planning process. It was apparent that citizens wanted to participate in formulating decisions rather than simply responding to them.

Knowing this, the Corps' Urban Study staff considered decisions related to the Plan of Study development and addressed themselves to the following questions: What are we willing to let the public decide? What are we not willing to let the public decide? (Subjects identified as not appropriate for public decision-making were those required or mandated by authorities beyond Corps control.)

Four elements of the Plan of Study were identified as being appropriate subjects for public preferences and decisions. These were Problem Identification, Study Area, Study Management, and Public Participation for Stages 2 and 3. Those elements identified as not pertinent to the public's interest in Stage 1 were Justification of the Study, Statement of Planning Objectives, Institutional Considerations, Study Effort Allocation, and Schedule of Work Tasks and Costs.

MEANS TO IDENTIFY PUBLIC PREFERENCES

An Option Paper (with a response form) was prepared for each of these four parts of the Plan of Study. The papers were distributed to points of contact in each of the five local governments (City of Tucson, Pima County, City of South Tucson, and the towns of Marana and Oro Valley). A preliminary governmental consensus was developed based on the local governments' preferences.

The Option Papers were then distributed to any interested individuals and all identified special interest groups. Availability of this means to solicit public preferences was announced in the press, radio and television, and in special mailings to civic organizations in eastern Pima County. The governmental consensus was reported to the public recipients of Option Papers, not as a limiting factor or indication that the Corps had already made a decision, but as information needed by the public to make realistic comments and report their preferences.

The next step or method in verifying public preferences was the sponsorship of an all-day workshop in June 1978. Preceded by an informational meeting several days earlier, the workshop was designed to test reported preferences and to identify any conflicts between the public and the local governments' preferences.

CONFLICT IDENTIFICATION AND RESOLUTION

This process revealed that the public concurred with local governments on all but one issue. That issue was the question of citizen representation on the Steering Committee, the management mechanism that would provide policy direction to the Urban Study staff for the duration of the study. Local governments had proposed a 5-member Steering Committee made up of city managers (Tucson, Pima County, South Tucson) and locally elected officials (Marana and Oro Valley).

The public response to that proposal, derived from Option Paper responses and the results of the workshop, was that there should be general public voting representation on the Steering Committee. Suggestions stated in discussion groups at the workshop had ranged from appointing to the proposed committee one citizen voting member to establishing a Citizen Executive Committee.

Reasons expressed at the workshop to justify citizens in a decision-making role included: "give citizens respect and motivation to become knowledgeable"; "advisory role (only) not preferred, has no power"; "temper politicians"; "lack of trust in elected officials to carry out public wishes"; "more public acceptance of actions of Corps."

In addition to learning that the public desired representation on the decision-making mechanism for the Urban Study, the Corps also learned that both agency and general public response to the concept of an advisory committee was positive and specific. Characteristics of an advisory committee agreed to were that it have broad representation, be Urban Study-oriented, oversee educational outreach efforts from the Corps to the general public, have a funded staff, and that there be no political appointments.

For nearly three months at the end of Stage 1, the Corps worked with local governments to achieve a compromise solution to the question of makeup of the Steering Committee for the Tucson Urban Study. The Urban Study staff developed a proposal for Steering Committee makeup that would meet the requirements of local governments and also provide the desired citizen representation. The Corps' plan was for an 11-member Steering Committee, adding five citizens to the committee of three managers and two elected officials, plus one Corps of Engineers representative.

Initially, contacts in the five local governments agreed to the fact that including citizens in a steering capacity was a reasonable idea. However, the local governmental representatives were not willing to have citizens sit with them as equal voting members on Urban Study agenda items. It appeared to this committee that, by including citizen members, more time would be required to deal with issues addressed and that there was no precedent for such an arrangement. After consideration and discussion of many options, the local governments accepted the Corps' recommendation that the Urban Study be under the direction of a Citizen Steering Committee. The Steering Committee was proposed to have nine members: one from each of the five local governmental jurisdictions in eastern Pima County, three at-large, and one from the Papago Indian Reservation. The Corps and the Urban Study's Citizen Advisory Committee would jointly nominate the nine members to the PAG Regional Council (the regional council of governments) for appointment. After the local governments agreed to this arrangement, the result was reported publicly.

RESULTS OF THE STAGE 1 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

The Citizen Steering Committee for the Tucson Urban Study has been formed and meets regularly to provide direction and control for Stages 2 and 3 planning activities. Responsive to preferences of an ongoing Citizen Advisory Committee, the Steering Committee will formally recommend study results to the PAG Regional Council. The Advisory Committee is open to any interested people and currently has nearly two hundred members, of which approximately 80 are eligible to vote under rules established by the committee itself.

Currently being developed by the Urban Study staff is a range of alternative plans addressing solutions to flooding problems on the area's watercourses. Also under study are wastewater reuse; urban runoff; groundwater recharge; and enhancement of recreation, wildlife, historical, archaeological, and cultural resources.

In conclusion, it can be stated that all parties have a clear understanding of what role each will play in the course of the Tucson Urban Study.

The Corps has accepted the responsibility of maintaining a productive, if time-consuming, relationship with the public in eastern Pima County. The responsibility undertaken requires a genuine commitment on the part of the Urban Study staff, administrative assistance and support for the citizen committees, and budgeted funds to monitor and maintain the program.

The participating public has accepted the responsibility to inform itself on Urban Study matters, attend frequent meetings, and take into account legal and institutional limitations as alternative plans are evaluated.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES DURING STAGE 1

A -- General Public
 B -- Participating Public
 C -- Governments/Agencies

- | A | B | C | |
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| X | | | 1. "Urban Study Program," article in bulletin of Southern Arizona Environmental Council; 2 pp., November 1977. |
| X | X | X | 2. Study Initiation Announcement, December 1977. Mailed to 4,500 individuals in eastern Pima County. |
| | X | | 3. Meeting with individuals and representatives of prominent community organizations to determine criteria for a successful public involvement program, 28 December 1977. |
| X | X | | 4. Preparation and distribution on request of a Briefing Paper on the Tucson Urban Study, 3 pp., 16 January 1978. |
| X | X | | 5. Option Paper, Public Participation Program, Stage 1; 13 pp., 10 March 1978. Distribution to local governments and individuals expressing interest in the Tucson Urban Study. |
| X | X | | 6. Coordination meeting with Option Paper reviewers and other interested persons to discuss and seek public agreement on the Public Participation Element of the Plan of Study, Stage 1, 30 March 1978. |
| X | | | 7. Display of the Tucson Urban Study Planning Process (8' x 40") exhibited at the Parade of Homes, April-May 1978. |
| X | X | | 8. Announcement of Public Participation Program, Stage 1, 14 April 1978. Fact sheet on Tucson Urban Study and press release provided to: a) presidents or executive directors of ten community organizations, b) seven editors of widely read organizational newsletters and bulletins in southern Arizona, c) sixteen homeowners associations in the Tucson metropolitan area, and d) eight newspapers in the Tucson area. |
| | X | | 9. Established a sequence of events for option paper review by local governments represented on the Pima Association of Governments (PAG), April-May 1978. Informal meetings with representatives of the five local governments were held to discuss contents of each option paper. |
| X | | | 10. Distribution of option papers on elements of the Plan of Study (Problem Identification, Study Area, Management, Public Participation, Stages 2 and 3) to individuals and representatives of community organizations, April-May 1978. Local governments' preferences were reported to these people. |
| X | | | 11. Various appearances by Urban Study staff on television and radio, April-June 1978. |
| X | X | X | 12. Mailed 4,000 flyers to individuals in eastern Pima County announcing activities #13 and #14. |
| X | X | X | 13. Informational meeting on the Tucson Urban Study for the general public, 20 June 1978. Cragin Elementary School. 70 individuals attended. |
| X | X | | 14. Tucson Urban Study Workshop, 24 June 1978. El Rio Neighborhood Center. 65 participants indicated preferences on water resources problem identification, study area, management steering mechanism, and future public involvement. |
| | X | | 15. Announcement of results of Workshop mailed to 150 individuals (workshop participants plus other interested people), 7 July 1978. |
| | X | | 16. Workshop results provided to five local governments, 10 July 1978. |
| | X | | 17. Meeting with local governments to discuss workshop results on the management steering mechanism for the Tucson Urban Study, 20 July 1978. |
| X | X | X | 18. Public Information Brochure (summary of the draft Plan of Study) and announcement of Public Meetings mailed to 433 people in August 1978. Copies were also provided to 12 branches of the Tucson Public Library. |

A B C

X 19. Radio and television appearances by Urban Study Manager to promote public awareness of and participation in the scheduled Public Meetings, July-August 1978.

X X X 20. Public Meetings, 22-23 August 1978.