

# The politics of community engagement

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I'm going to be controversial today. I'm here to present a view that, despite a huge volume of literature and practice, vast amounts of community consultation undertaken by governments is not genuine, and that the bigger the project the less genuine it is likely to be.

The best chance you have of a genuine process is where the outcomes don't matter all that much – when there isn't much at stake.

And even with small projects where a genuine process could be used often the processes aren't put in place or properly resourced! This is sometimes done inadvertently, but often because community engagement at the end of the day is not seen as being a high priority when it comes to budget allocations.

I wear many hats, but I'm speaking not on behalf of Council or VLGA, or even my business practice. I'm speaking as a community member, an activist for a better more sustainable world who has had enough of being

consulted when the process isn't genuine – and you can smell these processes a mile away.!

I practice consultation, and I don't undertake work for clients where I doubt their commitment to genuine meaningful consultation. I understand the values which underline genuine consultation. I try and ensure that my Council practices genuine consultation ( and it fails to quite regularly, despite a good consultation policy).

It gives me quite a background to be critical from.

I'd like to run this session by going through each of my five consultation models. AS I introduce each one I'd like you to think about your own examples of this type of 'consultation'. I'll then share a story of each one with you and then we can have a short discussion about it and your examples.

## **1 Failed consultation Model 1: no consultation**

Place yourself in a rural municipality in Tasmania, which shall remain nameless. I've just bought a block of land in a small town there, on the coast, surrounded by national park. I've just been asked by the local environment group to write a letter to Council about a creek reserve just down the street from my block. This creek drains into the main estuarine creek which flows out to sea about 300 metres downstream of this reserve. It's crown land, and the creek has been known to have platypus in it. The local environment group is currently working with council in weeding the reserve and have a revegetation program planned. But when

they were last talking about the revegetation plan with the relevant council officers they were told that the plan would have to be put on hold as it seems the reserve was going to be sold.

It turns out the next door neighbour of the reserve has requested to the state government to buy the land to pipe the creek and level the block and probably build a boat shed on top of it.

The relevant government department has written to the Council about the possible sale. Council have replied that they don't object to the land being sold!

This seems to be a classic case of absolutely no thought that the community should have a say in such things! Why on earth would we do that – it just makes the process messy! We make the decisions around here.

Where do you start? From a political perspective I'm tempted to say throw the councillors out at the next election and replace the CEO!

Yet they have a public consultation policy which states that they will:

- promote effective communication and consultation between the Council and the community;
- enable the community to participate in Council planning and decision making
- promote Council decision-making which is open, transparent, responsive and accountable to the community

and that 'The community has a right to be involved in and informed about key decisions affecting their area'

However:

‘The policy will apply in those circumstances where the Council determines by a simple majority that it is appropriate to follow the Policy.’

‘The Policy is not intended to impede Council’s decision-making processes in any way but to provide a structured process for publicly canvassing issues that Council identifies as important to the community and/or having potential to significantly impact the community.’

The policy outlines a range of different consultative mechanisms, but notes that

‘Any steps taken by the Council in addition to the minimum requirements set out in this Policy are at the absolute discretion of the Council and will depend upon the particular matter under consideration, the resources available to the Council and the level of interest the matter is likely to generate’

The Council’s Environment policy also states that they will:

‘promote the sustainable development of natural and physical resources and the maintenance of ecological processes and genetic diversity.

and

‘encourage public involvement in resource management and planning’.

I haven’t yet spoken to them about the total lack of consultation about this issue. I expect I know what the response is going to be however – and that’s that because the issues is sale of crown land, that they decided that the consultation policy wouldn’t apply. End of story.

Is it incompetence? An oversight?

Or is it political? Reflective of a Council culture, despite Council policy to the contrary, of ‘we’re in charge here – we are in government and we know best. We will make decisions for you in your best interests. And we don’t want the public involved anymore than is absolutely necessary.’

## **2 Failed consultation model 2 - lacking capacity: tried hard but insufficient skills and/or resources**

We do this one all the time in Maribyrnong. There’s no big conspiracy to pull the wool over people’s eyes– it just happens that way, or looks like that’s what we have planned to do, often with unfortunate consequences in terms of the community’s relations with Council. Often it is because that to do the consultation well is really hard.

To pick one example –we – Maribyrnong Council - planned to introduce ticket parking in part of the Footscray shopping precinct, as part of the implementation of a parking strategy for Footscray. Our officers felt they did the consultation – the parking strategy was put out for community consultation via a brochure that was sent to all local households and to all local businesses. We received a fair number of comments about the strategy – mostly from English speaking residents.

Only problem was the people who are most passionate about the issue are the Vietnamese speaking traders. They hardly responded at all. The Footscray Asian Business Association told us that they thought more parking was needed – they didn’t really engage over the issue of paying

or not paying – it was in the summary of the report we distributed but not greatly highlighted.

So the parking strategy passed through Council, largely unchanged.

Almost two years later we came to implement the pay parking. Again our officers felt they did the right thing. They went from shop to shop with a Vietnamese speaking person to let them know that pay parking was about to be introduced. They put up signs – translated into Vietnamese. Almost all the people they spoke to in the shops said very little. They accepted the information – translated into Vietnamese - and nodded politely. Two problems here – one in many cases the people our officers were speaking to were not the owners or managers of the business. The second issue was a cultural issue – anyone who had concerns about it were not culturally going to challenge and confront our officers on the spot. They were polite, and didn't let on how they were really thinking. We received a small number of further responses about the issue but none to make us sit up and take notice, and re-evaluate

So we kept moving on down the track – it's now three years since we consulted on the strategy. We install and turn on the ticket machines.. All hell breaks loose. A petition to 'stop pay parking' is in every shop. Every shop window has posters up to 'stop pay parking'. People plaster the machines with posters so others can't use them. And they decide to bring a public protest to a Council meeting – by now the issue is also being used for political ends with our local MP taking sides with the traders. Around 200 people stage a noisy protest in the Council meeting and we agree to hold off on booking people whilst we do further consultation. As the ward councillor I do the rounds again with a Vietnamese speaking officer and the President of the Asian Business

Association. The businesses are fearful that introducing pay parking will ruin their businesses – they don't accept the (in my mind) very solid evidence that introducing pay parking will be good for their businesses by increasing turnover of parking spaces.

We end up agreeing on a trade-off – removing the machines in the off street parking area they are most concerned about but keeping the on street machines. We get congratulated at the next Council meeting at least for listening and responding but it was hard yards and lots of angst and anger that should have been avoided.

Now we are working out how to do the consultation for the next tranch of machines...and have employed consultants who specialise in parking strategies and their implementation to plan the process – and will probably end up spending 10 times as much as the last stage over a much longer period of time.

### **3 Failed consultation Model 3 - 'going through the motions' and 'quick and dirty to avoid the can of worms!'**

A government department in Victoria and an outer suburban Council who are jointly working on a development framework for a regional activity centre. They work together to develop a planning framework for the growth of the centre, which includes higher density development in the heart of the centre. Only problem being they have worked on the policy for months and months and months and it gets put out as a final draft for public comment for a matter of weeks. Oh yes plus a community meeting.

Not surprisingly the community were up in arms. They don't want high density development. They want lots of other things like community services, health services and better public transport. But they are fearful of high rise development, flats, poor quality housing... it doesn't fit with their mental model of what they bought into when they built their dream home in the wide open fields of new suburbia.

There was clearly no intention from government or council to get genuine input into their framework. They knew what they wanted – a planning framework that fitted into the Melbourne 2030 model. All they wanted from the community was a bit of tidying up round the edges – such as allowing the community decide exactly where the boundary of the high density development zone would be.

They would have shied away from a comprehensive consultation process for a number of reasons, including cost and timelines. The main one reason I think though that they didn't do it was that they would have known it would have brought up a whole range of issues which were out of the control of the process. All they were doing was planning a transit city in accordance with government policy. That was in their minds non negotiable. Further, they couldn't do anything about the lack of schools, healthcare and public transport. What's the point then of getting people to talk about them? It might create expectations that they were going to deliver on such things! They were consulting on their agenda, not the community's agenda.

Better to just ask for comments and hope that people don't notice – get a handful of comments and then you've been through the motions and the big issues can wait for another day.

The community noticed of course. The process got severely delayed whilst the Council to their credit went about a more comprehensive, holistic consultation process. It turned up all the things that community was really concerned about – plus confirmed the fears that a sizable proportion of the community had about high density development. Council and government agreed to greater delineation about where high density would stop – and committed that it wouldn't impact on the existing low density residential areas.

Once again – government knows best, and they have missed an opportunity of genuinely involving the community in planning their neighbourhood. Because they had no intention of sharing power – it stayed firmly in the government's hands.

It's no wonder the adversarial anti development action groups spring up in response... who then need to be managed using techniques of 'outrage mitigation'. Which brings us to....

#### **4 Failed consultation model 4 - the decision has already been made**

The difference between this model and the last is that for these really big projects the government is happy to go through the motions of 'extensive consultation' over a quite lengthy period of time, but the only thing that is going to change their mind is not the quality of the arguments put or the passion with which the community hold them but which way the political wind is blowing. If it's not going to lose them too many votes or seats then they will plough on regardless; all the while running consultative committees, inviting submissions, going through exhaustive

environmental impact statements and keeping all number of consultants in work...all of which ends up making not one jot of difference – no that's not fair – they provide small numbers of jots of difference. Like what colour will the desalination plant be and how many days a week the channel deepening dredge will operate.

For most big projects the government knows what it wants to do and it is following this path because of reasons quite extraneous to what the community think.

Largely these reasons are:

- Because the issue is seen as a political winner in marginal seats
- Because doing things this way keeps the status quo and supports those who currently have power and influence in our society. It may be what suits the 'big end of town', or is a project that is able to be financed through a PPP, which means it has much less impact on the government's balance sheet. Further if it is a PPP, then lots of information about the project has to be deemed 'commercial in confidence' so you can't consult about it even if you wanted to
- Because it's a cheap and/or short-term fix, and they don't want to take on the difficult task of working out just how they can afford or cope with political backlash by doing something that's long term or more expensive.
- Because they are already five years down the track of planning the process before the consultative process

We have been through an 'extensive' consultation process like this for one big ticket item in Victoria over the last two years- channel deepening

–Then there’s the proposed desalination plant. And a pretty ad-hoc / ‘thinking it up as we go along’ process over the potential cross city east west tollway tunnel.

The channel deepening was never really up for discussion. Despite the consultative committees, the EES process, the supplementary EES... it was going to go ahead, unless the political heat just got too much. Which it threatened to do in the last months, but it was all too late. And the community relations process was very well managed for the government by some very skilled operators. Hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on it if not more– against a community campaign mounted by a group of well meaning, totally volunteer and very much shoe string campaigners.

Now /our Premier would say of course that we had a genuine process, they really did listen to the community but the economic arguments overrode the community and environmental concerns, and that you can’t complain a process isn’t genuine just because it didn’t end up with the answer you wanted. This would be an argument if the economic case was strong. It’s not. It’s been challenged and the challenges have gone unanswered.

There has been a complete unwillingness to consider other ‘world views’ of how to deal with freight issues – via sea and on land. Entertaining things like seeing Melbourne in the context of other Australian ports rather than in competition with them. Things like whether the existing Port of Melbourne is going to be our Port for long enough to make the environmental damage worth it. After all after 2030 the Port is meant to be at capacity and the Port of Hastings is slated to replace it.

Of course entertaining that things might have to radically change is too threatening to existing powerful forces in the community who like things the way they are thanks very much. The word around town is that channel deepening was the test that the business community had put to the ALP government – they had to deliver on it to have their on-going support. With the dredger the Queen of the Netherlands doing her worst in the Bay as we speak, they have clearly passed the test.

I could tell similar stories about the cross city tunnel –aka the Eddington inquiry or the East West Link Needs Assessment , and the desalination plant but they are respectively still underway or still to formally begin...and the story is much the same...the big question is not whether the formal community consultation process could possibly result in an answer of ‘don’t go ahead’ – they won’t. The question is whether enough political heat will be generated to force an about face.

## **5 And the genuine alternative!**

You know all this I’m sure. Give yourself a shake and remind yourself that public sector community engagement doesn’t have to be like this – that there are those real gems that shine through every so often, when you have a chance to be part of really excellent community engagement practices. (Although as I said at the beginning sadly all too often these occur only when the stakes aren’t too high.)

We do good processes in Maribyrnong too don’t get me wrong– I was briefed just yesterday about the innovative processes we are going to follow to consult about a new community park – where no one has a set

agenda – and within budget constraints, the communities views will prevail.

Or where the political imperatives and the community agenda are aligned – urban renewal in Footscray for example where the community want change to revitalize a key district centre and there's lots in it for the government and developers in doing so

I've just written a book chapter on community attitudes towards transit oriented development – higher density development around transport hubs ( a la my example three.)

My conclusions on how to do community engagement well in that context will suffice as a conclusion here too: My six critical elements are as follows:

1. Do best practice, using the expertise of excellent practitioners in community involvement. Best practice means quite a lot more than having a draft master plan out for public comment for a month... It takes time and costs money – but a couple of hundred thousand dollars over a few years is a small additional cost that is likely to result in a supportive community working with Council and state government, and most likely a better development given the wisdom of the community is taken into account.
2. Have long lead times to give people time to get used to the idea, and to allow thorough extensive community involvement in the final design.

3. Excellent information and education about why what you are proposing is a good thing. This community education needs to be sophisticated, and have a context of the cultural change and behaviour change that is being asked for. Just producing a brochure and sending it out to the 'usual suspects' isn't going to be enough.
4. Be upfront about what is being proposed – don't try and paper over aspects of the development that seem more controversial..
5. Negotiate with the community – this may result in change that is more modest than you wanted, but if it's supported by most of the community that's a huge achievement. In contrast, don't push things through regardless – it may work in the immediate circumstances but builds resentment and cynicism regarding public processes in the future.
6. Remember that you are planning people's homes and lives. Respect their views – everyone is entitled to their views and shouldn't have them ridden roughshod over. Resist the temptation to label all people who don't agree as troublemakers who are the opposition and need to be beaten – rather engage, understand, discuss, negotiate. Not everyone is likely to agree in the end, but if you have the majority in support the consultation will have built a good platform for further development in the future.