

Engaging the community in Resource Recovery decision making processes: A case study

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Waste is endemic in all parts of the globe and with little likelihood of major reductions in consumption in the short term, authorities are examining ways in which the waste stream can be better managed, resources maximised and landfill replaced with what are considered to be better environmental solutions. Agenda 21 states that “future waste programmes should take maximum advantage of resource efficient approaches to the control of wastes. These activities should be carried out in conjunction with public education programmes”(United Nations 1992, Agenda 21, Chap 20, S16.). As part of this process, some authorities have deliberately chosen to incorporate community involvement and education in the decision making process for what is coming to be known as ‘resource recovery’. This paper will describe the community ‘engagement’ process undertaken by a metropolitan regional council in Perth, Western Australia as part of their Resource Recovery Project.

Introduction

While there is currently much discussion on the wicked problem of how to re-frame the waste debate to address the underlying issues of over consumption and over packaging², the waste cycle will always struggle to be sustainable if consistent effort is not put in to address the whole picture from production, through consumption to disposal. That said, the waste management hierarchy necessarily continues to operate at the disposal end of the waste cycle and local governments have to make decisions on how to best deal with the waste they currently collect and the waste load that they will have to cater for in the future. The Western Australia Government through the Waste Management Board’s Zero Waste 2020 policy (Waste Management Board 2001) has issued a Strategic Direction for Waste Management in Western Australia (2001) which suggests that ‘resource recovery’³ from the waste stream should be increased and sustainable alternatives to landfill be implemented.

During the term of the Gallop Labor Government in Western Australia (2002) and arising from the State Sustainability Strategy (Government of Western Australia 2003), community

¹ The author is Deputy Chairperson of the EMRC’s Waste Management Community Reference Group and received financial assistance from the EMRC in writing this paper. However, the opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to the EMRC.

² See for example Hamilton and Denniss (2005) “Affluenza: When is too much never enough”, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, and Gay Hawkins (2006) “Ethics of Waste: How we relate to rubbish”, Sydney: UNSW Press.

³ In keeping with the desire to educate the community about the value of recycling, recovering and reuse of components in the waste stream, the language used in this case study and the current literature has changed from the negative ‘waste disposal’ to the more positive implications of ‘resource recovery’.

consultation was encouraged at all levels of government⁴. This policy direction is a global phenomenon and as Petts (2001) describes:

The beginning of the 21st century sees political commitment to citizen participation. Participative democracy is needed to support representative democracy, which can no longer account for the diverse interests of citizens, the increasingly complex and uncertain threats to society, and the need to develop informed public preferences, knowledge and commitment to societal good (Petts 2001, p207).

As citizens have become more aware of the possible health and environmental issues associated with major projects, such as waste disposal and particularly hazardous waste, it makes good political sense to consult them and take their views on board before major decisions are taken. There are many tools that can be used for this purpose including public surveys, citizens' juries, twenty first century town meetings and appreciative inquiries (see, for example, (Petts and Leach 2000).

Lowndes, Pratchett et al (2001) carried out focus groups with various 'ordinary citizens' in the United Kingdom to ascertain their perceptions about local councils and community consultation. They found that there was a high degree of distrust of elected councillors and little awareness of opportunities for the community to take part in "opportunities to participate or influence their council"(Lowndes, Pratchett et al. 2001, p451). Further, they found that levels of public participation were historically low and were often restricted to the 'participators' or 'natural leaders' in any given community (Lowndes, Pratchett et al. 2001 p447) resulting in real or perceived social justice implications when participants are not representative of the wider community. In addition, their findings reflected the premise that public "involvement with the council was largely reactive" and that "people's *real* experiences of participation were more likely to relate to the protection of their own or their community's immediate interests, rather than to the wider 'issues' that they referred to in the abstract" (Lowndes, Pratchett et al. 2001 p447). The recommendations put forward by the focus groups to increase participation in local deliberative processes included recognition of the local community's priority issues; employing a variety of consultative processes to reach various sections of the community; working with local leaders and actively inviting people to participate. An ethic of "good customer care" in the consultation process and recognition of "citizen learning as a valid outcome of participation", combined with effective communication of the results of the consultation and decisions made were also considered vital (Lowndes, Pratchett et al. 2001, p454).

In the case study described in this paper, the metropolitan regional council chose to use a staged approach with the appointment of a community reference group, followed later in the process by local public meetings and regional workshops, backed up and corroborated by telephone surveys.

Trust

Trust plays a vital role in the community engagement/consultation process. In fact, the semantics of what you call the process can be indicative of the level of trust or control that is to be

⁴ The Citizens and Civics Branch of Premier and Cabinet was set up to assist government agencies in consulting with the community (see Consulting Citizens: A Resource Guide and Consulting Citizens: Planning for Success) and to promote open and transparent public consultation processes.

allocated to it (Lahiri-Dutt 2004). For instance, ‘engaging’ the community could imply that you are trying to educate them about the project and perhaps gain their support; whereas, ‘consultation’ may imply a more open deliberative process, whereby you want to enter into some form of dialogue, hear the community’s views and will take them into account in any decision making. In practice, there will more than likely be a collapsing of the two processes into one ‘deliberative process’, but it is important to be aware of these interpretations. Essentially, in theory, engaging and consulting communities is a two way process that acknowledges the rights of interested citizens to ask questions, expect answers and make informed suggestions, not merely a process of offering information and opinions about decisions that have already been taken.

Consultation is not the same as public education or public participation. Public education or public awareness programs are generally a one-way process to present information and to increase understanding of certain issues, and are about getting information out to audiences... In contrast, consultation is a mutual process, where information is provided to participants and new information and views are fed back in... (It) is aimed at involving the community in a process of decision making. It is premised on the right of the public to know what decision-makers are doing on their behalf, and to be involved.’(Standards Australia and Standards New Zealand 2000)

Clearly, thus, there is a need to be clear from the outset what the project involves, both in terms of what the organization expects as outcomes (without having set preconceived results which will render any truly consultative process ineffective) and on the part of the community or ‘consultees’ as to what they can expect to achieve from being part of the process. It is vital to state the ‘place’ of the engagement/consultation in the policy development or decision making process so that all those taking part are fully aware from the start of the level of input and influence which will be accorded to their participation.

Risk

There is a level of risk with any form of consultation; with questions of balance and representation being uppermost in designing a process the results of which can be described as the consensus of community opinion on a particular matter. Smit argues that

“the notion of a community is always something of a myth. A community implies a coherent entity with a clear identity and a commonality of purpose. The reality is that communities, more often than not, are made up of an agglomeration of factions and interest groups often locked in competitive relationships”(Smit 1990).

Given this diversity of community interests, the varying levels of consultation carried out and the fact that, so often, community consultation comes at the end of the planning process rather than at the beginning, such processes can be combative rather than consensus-raising exercises (Lahiri-Dutt 2004). This is not necessarily always because of an innate ‘us against them’ attitude, but sometimes merely because the organizers have misread protagonists’ concern as ‘anti’ and self interested rather than being due to a lack of clear information and understanding. Martin and Tait (1992) researched public attitudes to the release of genetically engineered organisms and found that there was “a communication barrier between public and scientists” (p42) and that, to understand the perspective of the public on this matter, one had “to explicate “fundamentalist,

value-laden issues” rather than looking for pragmatic or self-interested motives” (Martin and Tait 1992, p132) cited in (Davison, Barns et al. 1997, p337). Martin and Tait (1992) also found that difficulties had arisen in this particular communication process because industry had made a conscious decision not to inform the public about their technology, a process which they considered problematic, but rather to lobby intensively at government level. The excision of the public from these processes is likely to develop mistrust on their part that the proponents have something to hide which may affect public health or amenity. Consequently this may engender hostile actors either within or on the fringes of the consultation process which are most effectively countered through providing full and open public disclosure and explication and ongoing reporting of the progress of the deliberations.

Some actors, however, may deliberately choose to remain outside of a process and may carry on what could be described as a ‘misinformation campaign’ which can be insidious and damage the validity of the process. Their concerns may be real, however, and their decision to remain outside the process is an indication of their desire to ensure that damaging decisions are not taken without full disclosure. A misinformed public can be swayed by such campaigns, for instance in the press or by a particular lobby group, which may lead to the process being eschewed as window dressing and community participants feeling disenfranchised. Effective two-way and transparent communication, therefore, remains the key for a truly deliberative process.

The host agency must also consider how it will deal with public consultation outcomes which are counter to their original intentions. The involvement of the community in the planning process from a very early stage may lead to some changes in expected outcomes, and it is better to acknowledge and respond to these as they arise, rather than presenting the community with a *fait accompli* and then having to make extensive changes or difficult decisions after a belated engagement process. The willingness to be open and transparent on both the part of the public and the protagonists will more likely lead to overall public acceptance of reasoned arguments for or against a particular process, even if individuals are not completely convinced of all the details (Davison, Barns et al. 1997). Davison, Barns et al quote Turner and Wynne (1992) in this regard:

A robust public acceptance, resilient towards unexpected and adverse developments, requires that the public do more than “passively” tolerate a technology and its risks. They must more substantially identify with it. Analysis of the literature suggests that this requires communication processes which allow, indeed encourage, people to articulate conditions under which they would find technology acceptable, or even better, identify with it. This implies a need not merely for better methods of communication, but for different relationships between technologists and the public. Such a framework defines an alternative to communication which is often in reality inauthentic and self-defeating, and through which framings of risk are imposed rather than negotiated thus alienating the public (even if this alienation is not expressed). (Turner and Wynne 1992, p111)

This highlights two things; that the ‘experts’ must communicate their position and their technologies in clear, jargon-free language framed in an open explicatory style rather than a deliberately dense style that precludes greater understanding by the uninitiated and that the community must be open to further learning and engaging with competing viewpoints. By

providing opportunities for the community to take part in dialogues and learning processes and, consequently, contributing to various levels of decision making, it is expected that they will be more likely to experience 'ownership' of the process, be more tolerant of other opinions and be accepting of the final outcomes.

A further challenge to the validity of the engagement process will come about when final decisions are made. The public would understandably be unhappy should the results of community consultation be ignored in the final decision making or if the final outcome is totally opposite to what the 'public wants'. For this reason, it is important to state and restate throughout the process the importance given to the community's viewpoints and, particularly, the level of influence this information will have on final decisions. In the case study, the regional council has been careful to state in reports and reiterate at public consultation events that, while community input is vital to the decision making process and the council has made a commitment to make it possible "for all relevant members of the community to be engaged in the decision making process"(Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council 2005, p10), the final decision rests with the regional council with agreement from the member councils.

It is, sadly, true that some public consultation is carried out because it is mandated, rather than from a more enlightened position which sees public involvement in decision making as a necessary and welcome evolution in modern society. As Lahiri-Dutt (2004) suggests "citizen participation is, however, a lot more than just consulting people for the successful resolution of social, cultural and economic issues related to environmental conflicts. The primary goal of participation is to give proper responsibility to people for, and control over, their lives" (p15) through, in the case of this paper, a raised awareness of the personal value of actively practising resource recovery, both as individuals and as a community and through 'ownership' of the decisions that have been made.

Case Study

In Western Australia, responsibility for waste management is vested with local government. In some cases local governments have formed regional councils specifically to manage waste for their member councils. Elected councillor representatives from each of the local member councils sit on the Regional Councils, with member council officers representing their councils on various committees. The Regional Councils are supported by a Chief Executive Officer and various other functions including corporate services, waste management and other specialists, depending on the size of the regional council and its areas of interest. The collection of household waste is the responsibility of the individual member councils with the regional council providing regional solutions such as landfill, materials recycling facilities, composting plants etc. These solutions vary with each region and, in Perth, several regional councils are at various stages of the planning and implementation process with regard to resource recovery.

The Mindarie Regional Council, in Perth's northern suburbs, carried out a series of public surveys on possible sites and technologies, prior to belatedly engaging with their local community through a community advisory group and has now received environmental approval

for their project. The Southern Metropolitan Regional Council set up an aerobic waste treatment and composting plant, coupled with a materials recycling facility in 2003. The City of Gosnells accepted a tender for a solid waste energy recovery facility (SWERF) in 2001 with little or no community consultation and strong community opposition forced the proponent and the Council to retract the proposal. The South Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council (of which Gosnells is a member council) has now formed a community reference group and is currently undertaking initial community consultation on their resource recovery options.

The Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council (EMRC)

The EMRC in its present form was set up in 1998 and a landfill site at Red Hill, on the Darling Range to the north east of the city of Perth has operated since 1981. This site is considered to be a best practice waste management facility and in addition to municipal and commercial waste, the site offers safe disposal options for low level hazardous waste including contaminated soils for the whole of the Perth region. Household greenwaste, collected by one member council, and municipal parks and verge collections are composted through open windrows and processed for landscaping at the landfill and municipal landscaping uses. Landfill gas is captured and a privately run, on site, power station generates electricity into the power grid for approximately 2,400 homes. While Red Hill's semi-rural location and the EMRC's acquisition of surrounding properties means that there is sufficient capacity for traditional landfill at current rates for approximately another 60 years, the council, in keeping with state government policy, strongly supports the concept of resource recovery (see A Strategic Direction for Waste Management in Western Australia, November 2004). In May 2001, the EMRC resolved that to counter incorrect media articles about establishing a waste incinerator on a particular site, they would carry out a short term education program on resource recovery and this was achieved through a survey called "Think Global, Act Local" distributed through community newspapers and also with a Waste Minimisation and Recycling video distributed to some of the EMRC's member council areas. The survey detailed attitudes to waste reduction, awareness of resource recovery and preferred communication methods for EMRC material as well as demographic information and this was the precursor to the CWES market research project. Consultants had been engaged to develop a Comprehensive Waste Education Strategy (CWES) in March 2001 and following the initial feedback from the Think Global, Act Local survey, this strategy was based on the results of focus group meetings with community members, random surveys and stakeholder interviews including member council councillors and officers. On the basis of this report, a Waste Education Coordinator was appointed in 2002 to deliver and implement a regional education strategy (Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council 2002).

The EMRC have strongly supported the concept of comprehensive community engagement and education processes to assist with decision making for future sites and technologies. The council is in a unique position in that it has time to make well considered decisions without the pressure of a rapidly filling landfill site and, having noted the planning processes undertaken by other councils, has the benefit of learning from their mistakes in terms of the need for early, ongoing and thorough community consultation. The council is also in a position to be innovative in their solutions and can address various parts of the resource recovery puzzle as they seem feasible, for instance the recent project to set up regional mattress and wood recycling facilities is a forerunner to the possible option of setting up resource recovery parks in the region.

The project (now known as the Resource Recovery Project and/or RRP) has several community engagement/consultation components:

The Waste Management Community Reference Group (WMCRG)

Bearing in mind the experiences of other regional councils with regard to community consultation or lack of it, the EMRC held a Social Risk Assessment Workshop to identify likely consultation methods for the RRP. As a result, in March 2002, community members living in member council areas were invited to submit expressions of interest in becoming a member of the Waste Management Community Reference Group (WMCRG). This was done through adverts in local community newspapers, council offices and public libraries and invitations sent to 250 people who had expressed an interest in being informed about the RRP following the recycling education initiative by Cleanaway and Planet Ark. From 37 submissions, 15 members were selected to form the WMCRG according to their background, location and experience with other local community and special interest groups, with a spread of members from social, environmental and business sectors. The final group had a bias towards educated professionals but, that said, members had fairly active links with their local and wider community interests and had an expressed interest in good environmental outcomes, sustainable waste management, resource recovery and informed public decisionmaking.

The EMRC compiled terms of reference for the group which was later discussed by the group and confirmed. The role of WMCRG members included :

- Bringing their expertise to the group's deliberations and through their recommendations assisting the Strategic and Secondary Waste Treatment Committee to make further recommendations to council with regard to resource recovery education.
- Debating issues of interest to the group and raising items for consideration.
- Discussing position papers and reports developed by council or its committees which have been submitted to the group for deliberation.
- Recognising that the EMRC, because of the requirements of law, is required to make its own decision with regard to any advice placed before it. (WMCRG Terms of Reference, 2002).

A budget was allocated to cover the expenses of the community reference group including training, conference attendance, provision of meals and petrol allowances to attend meetings.

Representation

The terms of reference for the WMCRG make it clear that the group is considered to be representative of the local community but not that it represents that community. In other words, while some WMCRG members are active in other local community organizations and take the opportunity to feed back information to these groups and on occasion to report back to the WMCRG on issues that these communities have raised, while welcomed, this is not a required

function of members of the group. This issue was raised early in the process when participants were asked whether they were willing to be identified on the RGang website and public documents. Some members were happy to be identified and to make themselves available to speak to the public on matters in connection with the RRP, but others are less so and published meeting minutes do not normally identify discussants by name.

An independent facilitator ran the first few meetings to introduce the concept and to invite discussion on the EMRC's resource recovery proposals and new waste education campaign, 'the RGang'⁵. The WMCRG was quickly engaged and suggested changes to the proposed RGang promotional material, including asking for market research on its effectiveness with a range of age groups and backgrounds, prior to its launch. As a sign of the EMRC's willingness to work with the reference group, this and other future suggestions were acted on and reported back to the group.

Early in its formation, the group elected a chairperson and deputy and all monthly meetings have published agendas with proceedings officially minuted and publicly available on the RGang website. The Resource Recovery Project Manager and the Waste Education Officer attend all meetings, with the Chief Executive Officer attending occasionally and specialist facilitators are brought in for particular workshops.

The first 15 months were essentially a learning period and members received reports about various waste management practices and disposal technologies; the community engagement experience of Mindarie Regional Council, visited various waste management sites; attended council workshops with invited speakers with varying views on waste disposal and resource recovery; took part in WMCRG workshops on communication strategies, decision support systems, multi-criteria selection processes and the council's waste education priorities; heard the results of bin audits and market research projects and made submissions on various waste related government programs and legislation. In addition to reports from Council Officers, individual members were encouraged to submit agenda items and request further information. WMCRG members were also encouraged to attend related public engagement functions, the annual Waste and Recycle Conference, as well as the Red Hill Open Day. Support was also given for members to attend related training courses on social marketing and other issues.

Two WMCRG members left early in the process for work related reasons but the remaining members have formed a cohesive group which is unafraid to ask difficult questions and takes their role seriously both in terms of the ongoing RRP but also in the wider waste education process. Over the period, members' terms have been renewed and four new members have been appointed to ensure that all member councils were evenly represented (bringing the total to 16 members).

The WMCRG will continue to be part of the decision making process with regard to the RRP and discussions are also currently underway for some members to volunteer to become more involved with the community waste education programme on a more targeted basis.

⁵ see www.rgang.org.au

The Resource Recovery Project

Public information meetings were held in each member council area in 2004 to introduce the concept of Resource Recovery and explain why the EMRC was proposing to implement the project. Public attendance at these meetings was patchy even after advertising in local community newspapers but information packs were distributed to attendees and made available to interested members of the public on request. WMCRG members attended these meetings and were introduced as such.

Also, in 2004, tenders were called for consultants to identify relevant technology options and sites and design and implement a community engagement process for the Resource Recovery Project. The successful consultant was introduced to the WMCRG and their proposal explained in detail with opportunities for members to ask questions and suggest changes. The consultant and their community engagement specialists have regularly attended WMCRG meetings throughout the process and the group has been actively involved as a sounding board with regard to the larger community consultation process.

Wider Community Engagement Process

This process had several components:

1. An initial public telephone survey was undertaken across the member council areas (May 2005) to ascertain perceptions and knowledge about waste disposal, recycling and the level of acceptance for increased charges. This survey found :

- Respondents were aware of household waste collection options but not aware of how waste was managed.
- The most important attribute of the multiple bin system was improved recycling and greenhouse gas reduction.
- Over 90% of respondents were of the view that it was at least “quite important” that the Council take steps to minimize the environmental impact of waste management.
- 56% of respondents were quite satisfied with Council efforts to minimize environmental impacts of waste management.
- Most respondents felt that greenhouse gas reduction, improved recycling, keeping facilities away from houses and reducing tip volumes were important features of new processes to increase recycling, reduce landfill and the environmental impact of waste collection systems.
- There was a high level of interest in being kept informed about the process to develop a new way of managing household and commercial waste.
- Respondents thought it was reasonable to pay another \$50 per household per year to reduce the environmental impact of waste disposal.

2. Community meetings were held in the six member council areas in 2005 where the consultant explained the RRP and the community consultation process. Comment was invited and recorded by a professional facilitator on the results of the May 2005 telephone survey (see 1

above) and other issues which attendees thought should be considered at regional community workshops with regard to sites and technologies. Attendees were encouraged to register to be invited to the regional workshops. Write ups of each meeting were made available on the RGang website.

3. The first Regional Community Workshop was held in October 2005. Attendees included the WMCRG members, local councillors, members of the public and representatives of various local interest groups. The consultants had made a concerted effort to invite all groups which may have an interest in the RRP process. Information packs had been sent to all invitees prior to the workshop. 100 people attended. This workshop discussed in small groups four questions relating to the issues that were raised in the community meetings about sites, technologies and their implications. A report of the workshop and its outcomes was compiled and mailed to all attendees.

4. The outcomes of the first workshop were collated and presented to the WMCRG for approval as representative of community perceptions at the workshop.

5. Based on these approved workshop outcomes and the EMRC's guiding principles for the project (Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council 2005), the consultant explained the various weighting criteria on both sites and technologies that had been chosen as representative and asked for WMCRG comments and approval. Several issues were questioned by members and appropriate changes were made to the final document.

6. A second Regional Community Workshop was held in February 2006 using the agreed criteria and attendees took part in a multi-criteria analysis process to rank possible pre-identified sites and technologies. The results of the multi criteria analysis process were relayed to the workshop throughout the day as each section was completed. Attendees also completed pre and post workshop surveys which were fed into the analysis. The outcomes reflected the workshop's emphasis on the need for any proposed technology to do minimal damage to the environment and not to pose a health or noise risk for local residents. Attendee's post-survey comments on the process were included in the final report. 87 attended this workshop and again, a report of the outcomes was mailed to all attendees and made available on the RGang website.

7. A post workshop market research survey was carried out to gauge public opinion across the councils and to validate the outcomes of the workshop processes. Members of the public were approached by a market research company to take part in an initial telephone survey based on assessing community attitudes to resource recovery across the catchment of the EMRC and to provide a comparison between the member councils. 823 respondents took part in this survey. They were also invited to take part in a further survey based on the workshop multi criteria analysis process. Those who agreed were posted information packs and contacted later to answer questions. A large number of respondents (519) took part in the second part of the survey process and the results mirrored those of the community workshop.

8. In late 2006, the consultants reported to the EMRC on the community engagement process so far and have submitted recommendations for calling tenders for various technologies and site selection. These are currently undergoing financial modeling and other consideration by Council and will be presented to the WMCRG once this process has been completed.

9. When sites and technologies have been decided on, a community partnership agreement will be drawn up with community input with regard to how the facility should operate to maintain local health and environmental values.

Evaluation of the process based on community feedback

In November 2006, WMCRG members⁶ were invited to respond to a survey about their experience and perceptions of the WMCRG and its role in the RRP, including the wider community engagement process. There was a 50% response rate and most considered the WMCRG process had been very valuable as a sounding board before each stage of the project and provided both Council and the consultants with an indicator of likely community perceptions towards resource recovery. However, it was stressed that the WMCRG is not necessarily representative of the wider community but, rather, is more indicative of the 'concerned and informed community'.

Members reflected their concern for the environment, an interest in waste management or 'resource recovery' and their interest in ensuring transparent public involvement in the debate as reasons for becoming involved with the group and some saw it as an opportunity to use their professional knowledge for community benefit. This was a two way benefit as the members also derived pleasure from being part of the group. Most respondents said that they would remain involved with the WMCRG for the long term. The length of involvement was an issue for some but this has been addressed in the last year or so by not calling meetings just for meetings sake, but rather calling the group together when there are relevant issues and project reports to receive and give feedback to the council and the consultants.

There was some concern with regard to how much the EMRC valued the group's input and whether this was reflected through changed practices and regular feedback to the group but the majority viewed this positively. One respondent said:

Was not too sure at the beginning, but have realized that the Council has been very receptive to the outcomes of WMCRG activities and willing to have regard to WMCRG feedback in its decision making. This has demonstrated that the activities have had value and the process is worth continuing

Another respondent said that

The biggest thing was trying to make the process transparent, not deliberating on things in secret and making secret decisions. We also made good decisions on peripheral things to be considered, things that had not been considered by the project managers or the EMRC as they were focusing on a big, technical picture.

There is a danger in trying to reinvent the wheel when contemplating projects such as the one undertaken by the EMRC and, to an extent, they have taken account of the experiences of other regional councils in this regard. However, some WMCRG members expressed frustration that it takes a long time for seemingly simple education projects to come to fruition, given the necessity

⁶ For the purposes of avoiding any perception of bias in the survey results, the author, a member of the WMCRG, did not participate in the survey. Results were presented to the WMCRG meeting in February 2007.

to work with six different councils and their various officers and the difficulty engendered in 'getting all the councils on the same page'. This is particularly true with regard to member councils advertising their individual recycling messages, as opposed to adopting a blanket strategy and template such as the EMRC's RGang.

Some members of the WMCRG had expressed a willingness to act as messengers to spread the resource recovery message to the wider community by talking to community groups and schools. This is probably easily achievable and could be organised with minimal training and appropriate resource material. However, in this regard, some also made a case for financially supporting and encouraging existing local sustainability groups to spread the resource recovery message through their environmental and waste management programmes as opposed to Council creating new groups. There may be room to do both effectively.

The overall feeling of the WMCRG respondents was that the community meetings and regional workshops had been reasonably well designed and, despite the issue of 'preaching to the converted', the number of attendees and their willingness to take part in the workshop activities was impressive. In particular, the provision of detailed background information to all participants before the second workshop was valuable as it had given people time to familiarise themselves with the issues to be discussed.

The process undertaken managed to get input from a fair proportion of the EMRC community. The process has been transparent and fair – multi criteria analysis is a very good way to get as many options on the table as possible and then to determine their value against community opinion. What has also been important is that no one was rushed to get information together. The process is allowing for growth and input from many sectors, each trying to ensure that the latest information can be fed into the process (WMCRG respondent).

Relevant EMRC and member council officers and consultant representatives were invited to respond to a similar survey with regard to their perceptions about the value of the WMCRG. The response rate was too small to be generalisable but those that replied seem to echo the public utterings of the EMRC about the value of the community in the discussion. When asked if they would choose to use the community reference group model in other projects in the future, all respondents said yes. One commented that "the days of not listening to your community have long passed" and another said that:

The WMCRG allows the community to be represented in a project in a flexible proactive way. Many decisions would otherwise be taken with little or no community input as holding meetings/workshops requires significant effort and lead in time, therefore they are unpractical for ongoing project decisions.

They all reiterated their appreciation for the input of the WMCRG with regard to the various technical and community aspects of the project and for their large time commitment.

Participants at the regional workshops were invited to complete feedback forms at the end of the workshop. The comments on these forms were anonymous, collated by the consultant and published at the end of the regional workshops' reports (Cardno BSD/Meinhardt Joint Venture

2006)⁷. Participants were overwhelmingly interested in the environmental effects of any future waste technology and there was some scepticism with regard to how the EMRC would value community input. The physical organisation of the second workshop closely reflected feedback regarding location, food choices and provision of detailed information to participants prior to the workshop. Feedback from the second workshop reflected participant's interest in remaining involved with the engagement process and the hope that the community's views would be respected in any future decision making. There was still an element of scepticism and distrust in the comments but overall people expressed satisfaction with the process of the workshop and its outcomes.

Conclusion

It is evident from the case study above that, having noted the problems that neglecting to consult the community with regard to resource recovery has raised for other regional councils and local governments, the EMRC was keen to ensure wide community involvement in the decision making process for its own Resource Recovery Project. They have achieved this, with the advice of their community engagement consultants, through first identifying the risks associated with the project and recognizing the importance of engaging with the community and according them a valued position in the process at an early stage. The establishment of the WMCRG and the level of training and importance accorded to this group by EMRC officers and councillors and the extensive wider community consultation process has been a successful innovation that has provided a model for other regional councils considering resource recovery. The RRP is an ongoing process with harder decisions remaining to be taken regarding the final choice of site and technologies, but it is to be hoped that the EMRC will continue its community engagement process as it has started and that the community will take every opportunity to remain involved.

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⁷ All reports of workshops and community meetings are available on the EMRC website www.emrc.org.au and www.rgang.org.au

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