An Illustration of the Importance of Active Community Engagement and Information Targeting in Rock Hill, SC

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"Staff spent an enormous amount of time and thought brainstorming about the what they needed to do and how to best accomplish this but they spent little time trying to learn from the experiences of others. [There needs to be] effort ... to keep the neighbors involved in ... planning on an ongoing basis"

--Jim Baker, County Manager, York County, SC

Successful government public relations is characterized by several factors such as a high level of communications skill among political leaders. Such leaders see the public as a partner in carrying out the work of government. Successful governments typically integrate their communications managers into the senior management team. Such senior management teams usually have the ability to deal with crisis management communications as well as manage conflicts and maintain a high level of communications with employees. Finally, governments with successful public relations programs typically have a high level of performance measure ability.

Of those factors, the one which seems to receive less attention than the other factors by public officials is performance measurement of government public relations. To measure performance, governments usually quantify their activities and then compare the results to previously established parameters. Typical areas of measurement include processes, outcomes, cost-effectiveness, impact, best-practices, and impacts on target populations. Governments typically choose to measure performance to budget, control, motivate, evaluate, learn, or improve. However, the focus of these efforts tends to be on productivity or other "hard" dimensions of government operations in functions such as sanitation, police, or street work. As a result, the emphasis by public officials tends to be on budget, control, and motivation rather than evaluation, learning, and improvement. However, most public relations programs have fixed budgets (such as purchase of brochures) and are directly driven by senior management preferences rather than executed by employees far from senior management control. Public relations also focuses on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the public—which are notoriously difficult to measure as compared to garbage pickups, tickets written, or potholes filled. As a result, government officials tend to underuse performance measurement tools such as focus groups, polling, and surveys in order to do evaluation, learn from the public, and continuously improve their government-public communications.

Polling is still the most accurate gauge of public opinion to which we have regular access. While more than one in five Americans have gone "cell only," modern survey researchers have developed statistical techniques and sampling methodology, including the incorporation of wireless sample, to account for this fact. The major benefit is that

polling greatly reduces the "selection bias" that renders most on-line and mail surveys useless for measuring general opinion. When a government is seeking input from clients or customers who use a particular service or product, mail or on-line surveys can be a reasonably accurate, cost effective alternative. However, when soliciting general feedback on issues that a significant number of citizens will not be familiar with, or only significantly affects a small slice of the populace, mail and on-line surveys will tend to disproportionately garner responses from citizens who have extremely strong feelings on the issue while those with moderate views, or who are indifferent to the matter, will opt to not make the effort to click on or mail back the survey. Because a non-representative group will self-select to take the survey in disproportionately high numbers, the results will be skewed and policy makers will have an inaccurate view of the public mood. Further, professional polling, developed hand in glove with experts in survey research, avoids the pitfalls of results being affected by careless or biased wording and the ordering of questions. Additionally, no other method can paint as accurate a portrait of the knowledge level and information-gathering habits of the *typical* citizen. Knowing *what* citizens know and *how* they obtained that information is critical for crafting an effective strategic model for public relations.

As a result, government public relations practitioners are now much more frequently required to access and to understand polling information. The history of state and local governance in America is littered with the corpses of failed re-election campaigns for incumbents who were blind-sided by the vitriolic public reaction to measures they originally thought were uncontroversial. Additionally, countless amounts of time, energy, and budget dollars have been spent dousing the fires of controversies that could have been identified and defused pre-conflagration had only the staffs and officials sought to measure public opinion on the matter.

In other situations, government public relations practitioners are called on to understand the subtle interplay of issues that are seemingly unrelated, but combine in the minds of the public at certain times and only under certain circumstances to ignite controversy. The only way to be prepared for such situations is to create an active public relations strategy which incorporates the accurate measure of public attitudes and a full understanding of how citizens get their information and to whom do they turn for advice and information on community issues. The smart public official will actively engage the public on issues using a well crafted and highly targeted information strategy. Misinformation is dispatched with a laser shot, not a shotgun blast.

This case highlights the need for performance measurement of government's relations with specific publics in the community and how polling—sometimes even a single poll—can assist public officials with executing public policy while minimizing problems. The case presented here illustrates how the failure to engage the public and use performance measurement to evaluate that engagement escalated otherwise routine administrative actions into a long-running, costly community controversy with significant economic development consequences and ultimately an impact on local elections. The case also illustrates the value to government public relations practitioners of going beyond

communications and into developing strong feedback mechanisms that measure the performance of their communications with the public.

Airport Expansion at the Rock Hill/York County Airport

The Rock Hill/York County Airport, also known as Bryant Field, is located on the northwest side of Rock Hill just within the city limits. Rock Hill is the largest city in York County, SC, with approximately 67,339 in 2008. York County borders Mecklenburg County, NC, home to Charlotte, NC. York County includes approximately 227,003 residents in 2009. York was identified by the Census Bureau as the 26th fastest growing county in the nation among counties with 10,000 or more residents in 2008 based on percent change from 2007 to 2008. The Charlotte MSA was ranked by the Census Bureau in 2008 as the 7th fastest growing based on annual percent change. The city of Rock Hill has grown by over 129% and York County has grown by over 189% since the 1960 census, the first census following the initial construction of Bryant Field. As a result, the city and county governments were dealing with a large number of newcomers, many of whom moved away from more urban areas for York County and Rock Hill's relatively quiet and relaxed setting.

In its five decades of operation, the Rock Hill/York County Airport has expanded to meet operational needs several times. Each expansion was prefaced by years of planning reports. The latest plans for expansion are no exception. Current plans for expansion include extending the current 5,500 foot runway by another 1,000 feet to allow greater corporate jet traffic. That expansion would allow safe year-round takeoffs and landings by corporate jets that require a longer runway for takeoffs in hot weather. As a result, the airport would become an official alternative landing space for the nearby Charlotte International Airport for small jets with a consequent economic development impact as well as an improved image for the airport and thus the city and county.

The city and county thus planned to carry out what they regarded as a routine administrative process. Their process focused on meeting planning and public notice requirements but did not include active engagement of the public. Their first step was to create a Master Plan describing the runway extension and the required changes. The plan was adopted by the Rock Hill/York County Airport Commission, Rock Hill City Council, and York County Council in January of 2003. Planning and preparation to make the Master Plan a reality continued at a steady, if intermittent, pace over the next several years. The Master Plan was publicly available, eventually being posted in its entirety on the city of Rock Hill's website. Items related to progress on the Master Plan were brought up periodically in city and county council meetings as well as in informational meetings held to update the public. The city and the county both believed that they had more than fulfilled public disclosure requirements with a more than adequate level of transparency.

Controversy Erupts

As a result, public officials were taken aback to find residents near the airport expressing anger and confusion in October of 2007 during an informational in an elementary school near the airport. In planning for the increased air traffic, as well as for louder jet traffic, the city and county would be adopting an Airport Overlay District (AOD) which included three zones (Airport Use Zone, Airport Compatibility Zone, and Airport Influence Zone) identifying potential land use impact. The AOD in effect would be a buffer around the airport. The language of the proposed ordinance described the purpose of the AOD as intended "to regulate and restrict the height of structures, objects, or natural growth, regulate the locations of noise sensitive uses, and otherwise regulate the use of property in the vicinity" of the airport. Discussions of land use in the areas surrounding the airport and the potential impact on land use policy was discussed in the original Master Plan adopted in 2003. However, the residents at the meeting were evidence of a lack of community awareness. During 2007 the controversy built up and by 2008 involved the entire community in heated controversy. By the fall of 2008, one city council member elected after the Master Plan was adopted publically questioned what he saw as the lack of an adequate land use plan.

The flashpoint for the controversy was a proposed "seller disclosure statement." The disclosure form would require sellers of any property within the AOD to inform potential buyers of issues that may arise regarding to airport-related noise. The greatest community opposition to the airport expansion was in neighborhoods that would be impacted by the one and a half mile triangle shaped Airport Influence Zones that would extend beyond the ends of the runway in the takeoff and approach paths. Properties sold in the Airport Influence Zone had to disclose the possibility of being affected by airport noise.

Some of the most fervent opposition was located in a neighborhood constructed in the mid-1990s whose far end was barely more than a half-mile from the south edge of the airport runway. With only a few exceptions, the residents were not concerned about the noise from jet traffic but the impact of the disclosure statement on their home resale value. As it became clear to the residents that the disclosures were going to be required if the airport was expanded, residents shifted the fight from focusing on disclosure rules to trying to stop the airport expansion itself. They believed that if they could stop the airport expansion, there would be no need for the creation of the Airport Overlay District (AOD) and if there were no AOD, there would be no need for noise related sellers' disclosure.

At the first contentious informational meeting in October 2007, most affected residents were unaware of the years of planning and public notice regarding the airport expansion due to the lack of community engagement. Any resident actively looking for information about future airport plans would have found a great deal of specific information but most people were not aware of the situation. Once the controversy began, a few concerned citizens took active and aggressive stance regarding the Airport Overlay District. These citizens would begin disseminating information through flyers, letters to residents, websites, letters to the editor in the newspaper, appearances on local talk radio, and aggressively pushing the story to local news outlets.

The informational onslaught became increasingly better organized and coordinated. As a result, the opponents to the Airport Overlay District became the first to define the issue to the majority of the affected residents and thus framed the policy issue for much of the public and the media. A great deal of inaccurate information was spread suggesting that the expanded runway could be used for large commercial jets as well as an "L-39 Training Program," which would allow individuals to take joy rides in, or learn to fly, a Czech designed L-39 Albatross (the base model for a Soviet light attack fighter jet). For many residents, their first exposure to the Airport Overlay District were these accusations that it would bring large jets fighter jet joy rides to the skies over their homes.

Large commercial jet operations were impossible at the airport (given its small size and limited runways) and no one had ever approached the airport about operating a "Russian fighter jet" school. However, city and county officials were in a defensive positive and most of their forays into the battle of public information were reactive rather than proactive as they struggled to counter those perceptions with newspaper opinion articles and sound bites.

Consequences of the Controversy

City and county officials then moved to schedule special public meetings in hopes of countering misinformation and engaging opponents in a dialogue. Additionally, Rock Hill hired a consultant for $28,000 to organize and facilitate a community airport advisory group. By this point, however, public officials and AOD opponents were fighting two different battles. For the city and county, the AOD was an FAA requirement to proceed with the long ago agreed upon plan for airport development. The only points of discussion were how to make the requirements of the AOD more acceptable to the affected citizens. For opponents, however, the point of contention was stopping the AOD. No fruitful discussion could be held on any aspect of the Airport Overlay District since they did not accept the adoption of the AOD as a foregone conclusion. As a result, opponents accused the city and county of acting arrogantly with a predetermined conclusion and ignoring the concerns of citizens even after this series of widely publicized public meetings.

Eventually, necessary changes related to the AOD were approved by both city and county councils and the noise disclosure requirement was reworded in a manner so as to be more tolerable to residents. The adopted disclosure form states, "persons on the premises may be exposed to noise and other effects as may be inherent in normal municipal operations." While the change in the wording quieted much of the opposition, a renewed controversy is likely to erupt when actual construction on the runway extension begins. Additionally, the controversy has moved into the political arena. Some of the most outspoken opponents of the AOD are now doing political organizing for candidates challenging those elected public officials who advocated for the airport expansion. At least one of the anti- Airport Overlay District websites actively advocates for these political challengers and many of the original opponents have sought

and won executive positions in their neighborhood homeowners' associations in order to give them some control regarding information disseminated to residents.

The controversy nearly cost the chair of the York County Council his seat during the 2008 Republican primary when an anti-Airport Overlay District candidate ran against him. While he won re-election in the 2008 general election, airport opponents painted a political bull's-eye on his back. In June 2010, he did lose his seat in a primary run-off election with the heavy backing of anti-Airport Overlay District forces that had come together at the time of the original controversy. Had an active information strategy been in place to diffuse the situation before it ignited, these groups may have never formed and this formerly popular incumbent would have very likely won reelection.

What Went Wrong

The city and county might have adopted stricter zoning ordinance for the AOD areas two decades ago, which it became apparent that the airport would need to be eventually expanded and before many neighborhoods closest to the runways had been built. Other than that, the city and county made few active errors in the time leading up to the 2007 clashes with residents. Their mistake was in failing to be strategically proactive in controlling the flow of information. While every public disclosure requirement appears to have been willingly met, failure to actively analyze the impact of the Master Plan with an eye for potential conflicts with neighborhood residents, left the city and county in the position of appearing to only bring information to the public's attention when "forced" to do so. Public officials lost out on the choice of "battleground selection." Instead of fighting on the battleground of the merits of the airport expansion and then on the battleground of the Airport Overlay District requirements, they were forced to fight defensively on the battleground of misinformation.

Having to take this defensive role put them in the position of not knowing which battle needed to be fought and against whom it needed to be fought. As the lists of AOD supporters lined up by city and county leaders to speak at later meetings revealed, the public officials were mistaking community *leaders*, such as public figures, business executives, and past elected officials, with community "*influentials*." This latter group includes those "regular" people in any community or neighborhood to whom others turn for information and advice regarding public affairs. While community leaders are surely numbered among the "influentials" of their neighborhood, they are not present in every neighborhood or community, nor are they the singular voices in those places where they do reside. By getting behind the information curve of several agitated and motivated community Influentials, city and county public officials were forced to spend time, energy, and money putting out brush fires of opinion rather than progressing steadily ahead.

Possible Improvements

There is no magic bullet that could have prevented this conflagration nor is there a single answer that will prevent similar conflicts in the future. However, a multi-pronged

strategy of "Active Engagement" can help reduce the probability of similar controversies. Such a strategy would include review, citizen engagement, and information targeting.

Adequate Internal Review A strategy of actively reviewing any potential changes such as this with at least one staff or team member deliberately taking the perspective of a resident from the affected area might have foreseen the potential flap over the disclosure statements. At that point, multiple personnel could have pre-worked a solution that was more likely to address both the needs of the Master Plan and the concerns of the residents. For example, when planning staff from both city and county did finally begin drafting language for a required disclosure statement, their perspective was in ensuring those two jurisdictions were legally covered. Coming from that perspective, they adopted language that came across as overly harsh to the affected residents. Had at least one team member deliberately taken the perspective of a resident in the drafting stage, the initial language may have more closely resembled the final compromise which gave fair notice but was not unduly alarming.

Active Citizen Engagement Early engagement of citizens can often make the difference between making allies and making enemies. Rock Hill, like many cities, already has a department of Housing and Neighborhood Services. Within this department is a Neighborhood Empowerment group that works closely with neighborhood associations. This structure could be used as a conduit of information to neighborhoods. Going early and as often as necessary to neighborhoods that will be affected by changes would eliminate charges that no efforts were being made to inform the public and will undercut the legitimacy of claims that public officials are unwilling to listen to citizens. As the above episode demonstrates, perhaps the most important benefit of using this administrative body to actively engage residents is the ability to define the contours of an issue before its opponents have the opportunity.

Information Targeting Finally, cities and states need to identify the specific publics that they should target. Far too often, when a local government needs to disseminate information they use a blind shotgun approach without knowing the best target for the information nor whether the message was received nor whether the intended audience agrees or disagrees. In effect, they under-use performance measurement of government public relations.

Performance Measurement Using Polling

After the public flap over the Airport Overlay District, the city of Rock Hill and York County joined with several other community partners to survey the community in hope of getting a better understanding of where residents get their information, whether traditional methods work, who community residents saw as "credible" sources of information, and who citizens turned to when they needed information (i.e. the "Community Influentials"). This group contracted with the Social & Behavioral Research Lab (SBRL) at Winthrop University in Rock Hill to conduct the community survey.

The SBRL survey helped the city and county paint a picture of the information gathering habits of their residents. The survey found that approximately 7.1% of the York County population qualify as Community Influentials. The survey found some interesting similarities as well as key differences between Influentials and the general population.

Influentials were statistically no more or less likely to receive a daily newspaper, but what they read in the newspaper was clearly different. Influentials were more than twice as likely to say that they followed what was going on in government and public affairs with regard to local issues than the typical citizen. They were significantly more likely to use the newspaper as a source for news on local public affairs, but were also more likely to visit the websites of local news media. Influentials were just as likely to use search engines to search for information on the internet (as opposed to going to one specific source or portal) and tended to use the same search engine as everyone else. However, Influentials were <u>much</u> more likely to visit government websites.

Although a majority of all citizens do not watch local government public access channels, Influentials are more likely to watch it than others. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of all county residents purchase electricity directly from the city of Rock Hill. Along with the monthly statement, the city was paying to include a newsletter with information on a range of city related topics. The survey showed that although Influentials were more likely to read it than others, the number of people reading it was not high enough to justify the cost.

The Influentials are important conduits for all types of information, not just matters of local public affairs. Influentials were more than three times as likely to report that people came to them for "advice on matters important to them," not just governmental issues. This group is, indeed, influential. This makes reaching them critical to any information strategy.

The Influentials in York County, SC were more regular consumers of the news and this shows up in other preferences. For example, a plurality responded that they would prefer to receive information on community issues in the form of a notice in a local television newscast. By partnering with local media, local governments can be the first to introduce an issue to the public and be in a position to guide the search for information on it. For example, Influentials are more likely to visit government websites and would prefer to be introduced to issues in local television newscasts. Partnering with a media outlet to do a story on an issue that includes a website where people can go to get more information puts local governments in the driver's seat and ahead of the information curve. Otherwise, they will be relegated to playing catch up and fighting a campaign of misinformation as in the Airport Overlay District episode.

Rock Hill and York County will be able use the knowledge gained from this survey project for many years. The knowledge will allow them to better develop strategies for radio, internet, television, and community engagement that will hopefully will avoid a repetition of the airport expansion controversy.

Reflective Questions
Why do public officials often underuse performance measurement tools for government public relations such as polling?

What is the difference between meeting the minimum requirements for public disclosure and developing an "Active Engagement" strategy?

How can state and local governments do a better job of targeting when it comes to the dissemination of information?

When it comes to opinion, what is the difference between "manipulating" and "engaging" the public? Which strategy will pay off in the long run (i.e. beyond whatever immediate issue is dominating public discussion)? Why?