

CASE PROBLEM 4

Establishing a New Sanitary Landfill

The Situation:

The State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has ordered the existing sanitary landfill that is located in Bartlet City to close in two years. Bartlet City has a population of 250,000 and is considered a "progressive" city in a fairly conservative state. The Bartlet City Council must find an alternative method of handling the city's non-hazardous waste. Responsible Disposal, Inc. (RDI), for which you are the vice president for public relations, has an option to buy 1200 acres of open land near Bartlet City on Jones Road -- subject to approval of permits for the project. Hydrogeological and other tests already conducted on the site by RDI demonstrate that the site is suitable for a sanitary landfill. The land is owned by a prominent Bartlet City family and is the last parcel of the family's ancestral farm.

RDI is very profitable, publicly held, and has a reputation as a good employer. It also has been cited by the EPA for regulatory violations at landfills the company owns in other states.

RDI already has begun the process of obtaining the needed permits to develop a landfill on the Jones Road property. The regulatory agencies involved have scheduled an initial series of joint public hearings in 60 days. There will be several rounds of hearings during the permitting/approval process, which typically takes 12 months before a permit is issued or denied.

The road to the rural site has dozens of homes which use wells for their water source; most are occupied by younger families with children. A 250-unit moderately-priced apartment complex which would be within a half mile of the landfill is proposed by a major local real estate company.

Mrs. Johnson lives on Jones Road, has children ages 2, 3 and 6, and is adamantly opposed to the development of the landfill. As soon as RDI filed for the first of its permits -- about two months ago -- she began organizing opposition to your project. She has taken a leave of absence from her job on the staff of State Senator Smith to manage the opposition. Mrs. Johnson has enlisted the support (via a petition opposing the landfill siting) of most of her Jones Road neighbors, Senator Smith, and several local, regional and national environmental organizations. She has formed a non-profit corporation called Citizens Against the Landfill (CAL). She and her key volunteers are receiving support and training from several of these organizations on the techniques for successfully opposing such a project. CAL has had a very sympathetic reaction from two of the five Bartlet City Council members, in spite of the obvious advantages to the city of the landfill which include solving its waste problem, maintaining substantial tax revenues that are derived from the current site and, as RDI has promised as part of its proposal, providing free curbside pick-up to city residents for a period of two years.

The Situation (Continued):

CAL has gained its early support by focusing on the facts that trash will be brought to the new Bartlet City landfill from surrounding communities and other states; that the landfill is a hazard to area groundwater; that other RDI-operated landfills have been cited for violations; that noise and damage from large vehicles going to the new landfill will cause unacceptable noise and road damage; that home and land values in the neighborhood will be affected negatively; and that the proposed site should be purchased by the County and preserved as open space. CAL's initiative also proposes that the city should recycle its waste rather than allow a landfill.

As the vice president for public relations for RDI, you have the responsibility for providing the communication program needed to win the support needed to site the RDI Jones Road landfill. Your first meeting with the RDI Jones Road Landfill team is scheduled in one week and you are asked to present your plan for addressing the situation.

Read all following steps, then proceed.

Step One

Describe the formal and informal research that is needed. Identify a source of information and rationale for each activity that is recommended.

Findings from your research:

- Jones Road residents have the highest degree of opposition to the project and the least interest in broader community benefits of the proposed landfill.
- Opposition among Bartlet City residents to the project diminishes with distance from the proposed site. Acceptance of other beneficial side aspects of the project increases with distance from the site.
- At this preliminary stage approximately 30% of the Bartlet City population is opposed to the landfill proposal, about 30% is in favor of it, and 40% don't know how they feel about the issue.
- Concern about groundwater pollution is the strongest reason given for opposing the landfill, regardless of where people live in Bartlet City. RDI experts assure you that the leachate containment technology proposed will prevent contamination of the groundwater. Other scientific studies on the site show that the Jones Road residents' wells are "upstream" from the proposed landfill site and could not be affected by the site even if there were leaching into groundwater.
- The majority of residents believe that Bartlet City could recycle nearly 100% of its waste if the city, or RDI, would fund better recycling programs instead of building a landfill. However, no city in the U.S. recycles more than 40% of its waste and experts believe 50-60% would be an upper limit of what's achievable in the best of circumstances. Only one-in-four Bartlet City residents participate in the current recycling programs on a regular basis.
- Residents across town from the site are much more positive toward the proposed landfill and, even at this early stage, they are attracted by the idea of free waste pickup and new sources of tax revenue to support the needs of their growing community.

- Step 2:** In light of what you have learned, draft a broad goal for your communications effort – the end result you will hope to achieve for the company.
- Step 3:** Identify five (5) key publics, audiences or constituent groups to be included in your communications plan.
- Step 4:** Select one of those groups. Write one short-term and one long-term objective for your communications plan to address that target group and work toward your goal.
- Step 5:** Write two strategies to address that group, telling how you will work toward your objective.
- Step 6:** Write your main message for that group at this time.
- Step 7:** Identify three tactics or tools you will use to carry out your strategies. Identify which strategy each tactic is intended to carry out. (Your tactics may be the same for both strategies; they may be different.)
- Step 8:** Determine a spokesperson for each tactic.
- Step 9:** Estimate the costs associated with each tactic, including out-of-pocket expense, staff or volunteer time and in-kind donations.
- Step 10:** Draft a timetable for your communications plan. Set up a Gantt chart or some other device to show concisely how your plan will proceed.
- Step 11:** Consider how and when you will evaluate progress toward your short-term and long-term objective, and add that to your timetable. Where will you provide an opportunity for correcting your course, if that appears strategic?
- Step 12:** Determine how and when you will evaluate progress toward your overall goal, and add that to your timetable.