

June 26 2012 Water Utility Board Meeting

Public comments

Item 7: 25744: East Side Water Supply Project Advisory on Public Participation.

Firstly, I want to commend the Water Utility, and especially the facilitators Bert Stitt and Mark Stevens, for their intensive, skilled work in facilitating the East Side Water Supply Project CAPs in the last couple years. I know first-hand how difficult, messy, and time-consuming community engagement is—and also how rewarding and beneficial meaningful and effective citizen engagement can be in public decisionmaking. However, I want to raise a few critiques of the ESWS CAP process as well as the quality of citizen engagement since the process ended.

1. Unfortunately, some critical neighborhoods on the north side were not engaged in the ESWS CAP. Citizens in the Well 7 area just started learning for the first time in recent months about the new building and filtration plans for Well 7—and have been raising substantial and important questions about these plans, most of which have yet to be answered. It appears that during the ESWS CAP process, little effort was made to outreach to and actively engage citizens in the Well 7 area (Sherman & Brentwood Neighborhood Associations, etc). Regardless of the reasons for this gap, the WU is moving forward quickly with the filtration plans for Well 7, without input from the immediate neighborhood. Not surprisingly, Well 7 area residents feel left out of the process and are frustrated. I strongly suggest that the Water Utility actively engage this neighborhood as soon as possible in the decisions regarding Well 7 as they go forward. I recommend a public meeting on the northside to openly discuss the community's questions, concerns, and suggestions about Well 7 in general and the planned Fe/Mn filtration in particular. Further, I suggest that the Water Utility do a better job in the future in working with Alders and neighborhood leaders to make sure neighborhood associations, community groups, and other relevant groups/institutions are fully engaged while making decisions about wells.

2. I question the decision made at the last WUB meeting to omit the umbrella/standing CAP recommendation from the Standard Operating Procedure. It is not clear why and how this decision was made, given that it was made very quickly and with little discussion at the meeting. Further, the decision to omit this key recommendation suggests that the Water Utility viewed the ESWS CAP process as a token exercise, feels comfortable disregarding their key decisions, and plans to go forward without regular input and advice from a standing citizen advisory panel or from citizens in general. I hope this is not the case. Will the WU still include CAPs for individual wells? Please clarify.

Unfortunately, moreover, a suggestion made at the last meeting that the Water Board itself acts as a Standing CAP—and that's one reason a standing citizen advisory panel is not needed--reveals a lack of understanding and/or lack of respect for the value of citizen advisory panels and citizen engagement overall. The Water Utility Board—made up of city alders, government representatives, former city engineers, business representatives, and one citizen member, is not equivalent to a citizen advisory panel nor does it substituted for citizen engagement in any way. Other than the one citizen member on the Board, the members are political representatives, government staff, and institutional leaders who already have considerable power in city decisionmaking. Sadly, this decision indicates that the Board members did not value the time, energy, and input they received from the ESWS CAP and would like to make decisions in a top-down fashion from now on, with less (or no) citizen input. I hope this is not the case.

3. The fact that the Water Utility ignored repeated questions for over 5 months from citizens about the Smart Metering System--until the citizens came to a meeting and demanded answers—indeed reflects what seems to be an increasingly dismissive attitude towards engaging with citizens' questions in meaningful ways (or even addressing them at all). The water utility's unwillingness to facilitate any broad public discussion about the smart meter issues, even after receiving repeated questions from citizens about issues that were made in the past or those which have yet to be finalized, further reflects this attitude. Apparently the Water Utility is perfectly comfortable ignoring citizens' questions and concerns and expects few if any significant political repercussions from doing so. This is not only bad citizen engagement, but I propose it is a big mistake politically and will likely backfire.

In sum--sadly, overall, these developments indicate that despite the excellent work of the professional facilitators and citizens who engaged in the ESWS CAP process, whatever the Water Utility learned in the process was token, short-lived, and did not carry over into their engagement with actual citizens in real-world decisionmaking.

In fact, since the formal CAP process ended, the Water Utility citizen engagement process seems to have moved all the way to the left side of the IAP2 spectrum (see Attachment 5, Item 7)—even to the left of “inform”—to “ignore.”

I suggest that the Water Utility move several steps to the right on this spectrum in their future decisions as public servants.

Thanks,

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IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



International Association
for Public Participation

Increasing Level of Public Impact 

Inform

To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

Consult

To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

Involve

To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

Collaborate

To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

Empower

To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

Public participation goal

Promise to the public

We will keep you informed.

We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.

We will implement what you decide.

Example techniques

- Fact sheets
- Web sites
- Open houses
- Public comment
- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Public meetings
- Workshops
- Deliberative polling
- Citizen advisory committees
- Consensus-building
- Participatory decision-making
- Citizen juries
- Ballots
- Delegated decision