



The People Factor

IRWA's Social Ecology Course shows how community engagement works to get new projects built

BY JAMES KENT AND KEVIN PREISTER

The evolution of IRWA's Social Ecology program shows an "adaptive organization" at work. For years, right of way professionals have recognized the need for new approaches to community engagement that would build project understanding and support in local communities, while expediting project implementation.

In November, IRWA's Course 225, Social Ecology: Listening to Community was launched as a pilot program in Pablo, Montana. Developed as a collaborative effort between IRWA and the JKA Group, the course is designed to be an experiential hands-on learning experience. The best way to learn how to engage the community during the right of way

acquisition process is to meet local residents and speak with them in informal settings. As such, this is the first course to integrate community fieldwork as a major component of an IRWA class.

TREAT PEOPLE WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT

Social ecology is based on practical approaches to understanding the "people factor" in project planning. It requires that project developers understand the traditions, routine practices and lifestyles of a local area, and work to identify issues and opportunities from a citizen's perspective. If emerging issues can be resolved before the project is finalized, the community's support for the project will grow. Guided by

simple, common sense principles, the underlying theme of social ecology applies not only to the right of way profession, but to everyday life as well. Get to know people. Treat them with dignity and respect.

Over the years, the JKA Group has witnessed what happens when a new project is introduced into the community as a “done deal.” The residents often react with fear, and fear is a powerful motivator. When residents have anxiety about what might happen in their community, they may take whatever action is necessary to prevent a project from moving forward. Conversely, people who are being asked for their input and opinions are not likely to form resistance groups or boycott a project. In other words, collaboration cultivates mutual benefits.

ESTABLISHING THE GOALS

Teaching the basic components of collaboration required that the JKA Group and IRWA formalize the techniques for creating positive community engagement. The goals of the course were therefore defined as follows:

- Create harmony between people and the project to foster mutual benefits
- Discover and understand human patterns that already exist in the community
- Actively listen to the issues and opportunities expressed by local residents. They understand their community best and know whether or not the project creates a benefit
- Visit local places where “life happens” to get a first-hand glimpse of the impact your project may have on the community
- Develop proven solutions to help you mitigate potential issues

THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

With 20 participants in the class, the first day was devoted to conceptual development, specifically what to look for when going out into the local community. This includes identifying the informal networks and establishing how issues can arise and take form. The first step is to find these informal networks and describe their daily routines.

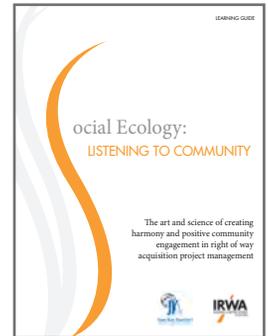
Within the local community, participants were asked to look for the following:

Communication Patterns – see who communicates with who, how communication occurs, who are the network archetypes, such as communicator and gatekeeper, and who has respect and trust within their networks.

Gathering Places – identify where people meet, routinely move information in the community and develop public positions about projects that impact the community.

Range of Citizen Issues – identify what issues may arise in the community regarding both community life and the project in question. Determine what stages the issues have already progressed through. Are the issues just emerging? Did they already exist? Have they become disruptive?

Opportunities for Responsive Management – ascertain whether the emerging issues can be resolved early and whether there are any win-win opportunities that integrate community interests with the interests of the project planners.



Right of Way Magazine began publishing Social Ecology articles in 2009. Since then, 18 more articles have followed and now comprise a Social Ecology Anthology that is used in the class.



Presenting a Social Ecology program at the 2013 Annual Conference. From left, Right of Way Magazine’s Publisher/Editor-in-Chief Barbara Billizer, James Kent, Kevin Preister and Glenn Winfree, SR/WA, who is credited with bringing IRWA and the JKA Group together.



Leonard Twoteeth from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe Roads Program, and Patricia Compton of the Blackfeet Tribe brought unique perspective to the project discussion.



Located on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Pablo, Montana, the first class was held at Mission Valley Power's training facility.



IRWA's Vice President of Curriculum Deidre Alves, M. ED. championed the concept of bringing a Social Ecology course to fruition.

THE "TAKEAWAY" FIELD EXPERIENCE

On the second day of the course, after prepping the class participants about what to look for, they were asked to spend a few hours in the community to observe, interact and reflect with local residents. Upon returning from the field, each participant presented a physical, social and economic description of their experience. A series of exercises helped participants reflect on their learning and to develop strategies for "taking it home."

The class came away with these strategies:

- 1) We may already do some of these activities, but now we have a framework so that our efforts can be intentional and systematic.
- 2) Engage the community early while there is still flexibility in design and implementation
- 3) Find the people that are well-regarded by others and engage them outside of formal settings
- 4) Make sure you are addressing issues that can be resolved and not trapped by those that cannot
- 5) Ensure upper management buys in to the approach and get project decision-makers involved early
- 6) Look at measures that show the savings of time and money using a social ecology approach
- 7) Incorporate a social risk assessment into the process during the project design phase

PUTTING THE TECHNIQUES INTO PRACTICE

The positive evaluations were testimony to the value of including the people factor into right of way work. The stories the participants brought back were amazing—of life in the Flathead Valley, changes over time on the Reservation, and the effects of the U.S. Highway 93 Bypass Rebuild Project on community life. We believe the interactive nature of the workshop reconnected professionals to the humanity of their work—that people got into this work to serve others and to make things better—and that people who will be the most affected by right of way projects have to be included.

One of the participants, David Whitlock, SR/WA said, "I've lived in this community for 22 years, and I learned things today about my town that I never knew. It was an eye-opener." Brad Thomas commented, "We always do this, but we always have our own agenda. When I was just observing and not trying to sell my point, I learned so much." And another summed it up this way, "I get it. Go slow now to go fast later."

Social ecology involves ways to include affected people that are comfortable for them, entering their environment, learning about their world, and getting their ideas, so that the final project not only addresses its technical goals, but strengthens community life as well. 🌱



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