

## **Community consultation – an expense or saving? A comparison between Samoan and Victorian planning systems**

*Stephanie McCarthy*<sup>\*</sup>

### **Introduction**

Community consultation. What do you think when you read these words? Unproductive, a waste of time, or perhaps a budget blower. If you are thinking this then you are right. It can be, but only if you let it. If undertaken properly, community consultation can be the most significant saving to a planning project.

This paper demonstrates the value of community consultation in a planning project by using examples from the Samoan and Australian planning context that provides a contrast of the different methods and extent to which the community can be consulted. But first, in order to appreciate community consultation's role in planning, it is important to understand the purpose of planning.

### **Purpose of planning**

The Planning and Environment Act (1987) (Vic) (PE Act) is the planning legislation administered in the state of Victoria. Section 4 of the Act states that:

'(1) The objectives of planning in Victoria are -

- (c) To secure a pleasant, efficient and safe working, living and recreational environment for all Victorians and visitors to Victoria...
- (e) To enable the orderly provision and co-ordination of public utilities and other facilities for the benefit of the community;
- (f) To balance the present and future interests of all Victorians.'

In 2004, Samoa enacted their first legislative planning framework, The Planning and Urban Management Act 2004 (PUM Act). Below is an extract defining the purpose of planning in Samoa:

'8. Objectives of this Act

- (d) To secure a pleasant, efficient and safe working, living and recreational environment for all Samoans and visitors to Samoa;
- (e) To protect public utilities and other assets and enable the orderly provision and co-ordination of public utilities and other facilities for the benefit of the community;
- (f) To balance the present and future interests of all Samoans.'

There is distinct commonality that planning is to benefit people. Therefore, one would assume that planning projects would benefit from involving people in the initial stages of development. However, this is not always the case as many decision makers avoid community participation because of the complexity of an issue unknown costs, and delays often associated with public involvement.

### **Changing face of planning**

Over the years, the science of planning has changed from a service provider role to a

---

<sup>\*</sup> Ms. McCarthy is a Planning Officer at the Planning and Urban Management Agency of the Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment.

community focused discipline. More than ever before, planning is concentrating on community benefits and as Howard (2004:17) observed, “it is now well accepted that building communities is more than shaping the physical form.” Planning firms and Government Departments are expanding to include community consultation sectors.

### **So what are the savings?**

Perhaps a more appropriate way to describe community consultation is as an ‘investment’ – something that earns interest to bring profit. This should not be limited to financial profit, as community consultation brings many intangible benefits that cannot be given monetary value. It is for this reason that these savings are often ignored and unaccounted for in cost benefit analysis.

Good community consultation activities can yield opportunity for communities and planners to:

Identify key environmental, social and economic issues;

- Develop community ownership and support;
- Design suitable responses to identified project issues; and
- Ensure that communities do not become a block to the project timeline.

These attributes contribute to making a realistic, effective and sustainable development.

### **Planning is unpredictable**

It is often difficult to see at the outset of a project, but one thing that is inevitable with any project is that things change as it progresses along. Good community consultation processes form positive relationships with a community, who are then more likely to accept or at least tolerate the inconveniences that a project visits upon them. Therefore, community consultation must be considered within a long-term horizon; it is only then possible to see that the savings do outweigh the costs. As stated by Moreland City Council (2000:4):

“Consultation may result in slower development of difficult or complex decisions, but in the long run leads to quicker implementation. This is because good consultation leads to community ownership of a decision as a result of the access of the community to the decision making process.”

### **Seeing the Savings - its all in the planning**

For community consultation to be effective, it must be constructed to fit into the context of existing planning processes. During consultation activities planners, developers, stakeholders and the community should explore and confirm questions such as:

- Where are we now?
- Where are we going?
- Where do we want to be?
- How do we get there?

These discussion points are crucial in forming mutual understandings about project objectives and related roles and responsibilities. It reinforces the importance of adopting a holistic approach, one that caters for all disciplines and accommodates conflicting needs and goals. Howard (2004:18) describes planning as a profession that is “developing more sophisticated tools for exploring questions and making an important contribution to achieving integrated planning outcomes.”

Finally, for the savings of community consultation to be realised, it is imperative to define the timing and duration of the proposed processes. This ensures consultations do not continue for unnecessary time periods, which minimises the risk of project delay. Timing and duration of consultation need to be tailored to each project. As stated by Perrantino “[Community consultation] should be there for a reasonable period, but it shouldn’t be open-ended, because with a large project with large amounts of capital involved, obviously has to follow a defined path and a period that is limited rather than open ended(Perrantino 2004:59).”

### **So what if the community isn’t consulted?**

More often, planners are finding that if they don’t invest time to consult communities during early project development stages, they are more than likely to come face to face with them during a later stage, in a less neighborly and more costly way. As planning legislation confers, the public has the right to be informed about proposed developments that may affect them. If they are void or deprived of this right, they will fight to get it back.

This usually occurs at a time critical stage of development and often turns into being a long and expensive procedure. Not only will the project suffer from time delays and associated costs, but communities often become divided as people either express support or concern about the proposed use or development. This is often caused by lack of initial information sharing which will inevitably lead to additional tensions and delays and in some instances can threaten cultural or environmental significant sites. This is demonstrated later using the case study of the Salelologa Township Development in Samoa. There are a number of factors that lead to community opposition to a project and as Winterbottom (2004:41) noted, the three key ones are:

- Lack of information;
- Failure to be involved; and
- Conflict of goals and objectives.

The take home message is that a lack of consultation creates opposition, which will always lead to ‘lose lose’ situations.

### **What are the requirements of community consultation?**

Before the Victorian and Samoan case studies are explored, it’s useful noting how community consultation is employed within the respective planning systems. The term ‘community consultation’ is not specifically contained within the Victorian or Samoan planning legislation. Instead, the concept is employed through different ways in the respective Acts. In the Victorian context, Section 4 of the Planning and Environment Act broadly states that:

“(2) The objectives of the planning framework established by this Act are – ...

(d) to ensure that the effects on the environment are considered and provide for explicit consideration of social and economic effects when decisions are made about the use and development of land.”

The PUM Act is based on a combination of Commonwealth Acts, namely Australia and New Zealand. Therefore, it is not surprising that Samoa adopted a similar ambiguous application of community consultation requirements. For example, Section 18 of the PUM Act requires that:

“(18) The Agency shall consult with all stakeholders where possible and shall provide them with all relevant information on the environment of the planning area....”

Stakeholder is defined in Section 2 as:

“A person with an interest in land which may be affected by a SMP [Sustainable Management Plan] or draft SMP or development application.”

Although it is not implicit, one may assume that this definition is inclusive of the community at large. In summary, these examples highlight that it is the obligation of each Government Authority or proponent to interpret, initiate, and implement community consultation appropriately.

Despite the similarity of community consultation concepts employed at the legislative level of Victoria and Samoa, there are noticeable inconsistencies at a political level. This is largely due to political powers having discretion to the nature and extent of community consultation required.

In the Victorian context, pursuant to Section 185(a) of the PE Act, the Minister for Planning can in certain instances exempt, waive or amend normal planning procedure, if he or she believes the project's implementation is in the best interest of Victoria.

The PUM Act makes similar concessions as Section 35 enables the planning authority to decide if a proposed development does not need consent (and therefore no community consultation) if it is believed that 'minimal environmental impact' will be caused. Like Victoria's exception to the rule, this decision is made at the discretion of the planning authority. These examples reinforces that the extent of community consultation is interpretive and is employed inconsistently within planning processes in Australia and Samoa.

### **Case study 1 - Eildon Dam improvement project**

#### Background

The Eildon Dam Improvement Project (EDIP) is a project of state significance and is funded by the Victorian Government and Goulburn Murray Water Authority. The township of Eildon is a small rural Victorian town situated adjacent to the dam and in close proximity to in north-eastern Victoria. The overall purpose of the EDIP is to strengthen the dam walls so that it will withstand large-scale extreme flood and seismic events and provide greater safety by minimising the likelihood of flooding and destruction of downstream communities.

The Eildon reservoir supplies 60% of the water in the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District, the largest irrigated farmland in Australia (Eildon Alliance (a), 2004: 28). It is one of Victoria's premier recreational areas and is used for various water sports, tourism, camping and outdoor activities. Eildon attracts visitors from near and far, all year round.

So then, how does one inform the public that development and construction of the dam will take over two years, Mt Sugarloaf (one of their popular scenic sites) will be used as a rock quarry and that boating and fishing activities will be restricted? The answer is community consultation.

#### The community involvement plan

During initial design phases, the Eildon Alliance developed a Community Involvement Plan, which detailed their commitment and proposed methodologies for community consultation. The overriding objective of community consultation in EDIP is:

“To work directly with the community, including Goulburn-Murray Water customers, affected residents, users of Lake Eildon and key stakeholder groups, throughout the planning, design, construction and decision-making process for the Eildon DIP to ensure that public input, issues and concerns are understood and considered.” (Eildon Alliance (b), 2004:8).

From the outset, community consultation was a significant expense to the overall project budget, as a diversity of activities was employed in initial stages of project development. One of the most effective strategies employed was 'Issue identification sessions,' consisting of community and stakeholder workshops that focused on identifying and addressing the community's issues and concerns.

Other methods of community consultation included an informal consultation through local network including a Saturday BBQ, a community newsletter and an information brochure which was distributed around town and the neighbouring region. Furthermore, a Community Reference Group which consisted of 20 people from the community, local traders, local Government and EDIP representatives who meet monthly to discuss project progression and issues of concern.



Figure 1: EDIP Community Reference Group on a site visit to view the project's progression (Source: Eildon Alliance, 2004).

### **The savings?**

The implementation of the Community Involvement Plan brought significant savings to the overall project, including:

- Early issue identification;
- Sense of community ownership;
- Improved community relationships (community reference group)
- Management fostered good relationship with community and assisted decision-making;
- Local employment opportunities; and
- Project on time.

In summary, community consultation was and continues to be an expense, however the overall savings, as noted above, far outweigh any monetary costs.

## **Case Study 2 - Proposed Saleologa township development**

### Background

In 1998, there was a public notice published in the Savali newspaper setting out the Government's intention to take land for the purpose of developing a new Salelologa township. The purpose of the new township is to provide residents of Savai'i with similar services that Upolu residents receive from Apia including Government services, commercial and industrial districts and education facilities. No objections were registered with the Lands and Titles Court. On October 20, 2000, the Government of Samoa acquired 2872 acres of customary land in Salelologa, Savai'i.

In the Cabinet Directive F.K. (02)31 of 10 September 2002, Cabinet directed that work on the new Township would begin within the 100 acres next to Salelologa East Drive (PUMA , 2004:2).

### Potential community effects

The proposed township development would significantly affect the community by:

- Loss of amenity to the area;
- Competition for their existing family enterprises;
- Altering their daily activities (services provided would reduce travel to the main island);
- Offering employment opportunities; and
- Providing educational and other resources.

By 2004, extensive land clearing has occurred, construction of the internal road network has begun, the land has been subdivided and Government Ministries have expressed interest in leasing land.

### Community consultation employed

Since the land acquisition and land survey conducted by village people in 2000, there has been no formal community consultation conducted for the proposed Salelologa Township development. However, the community has been made aware of the proposed development from secondary sources including feature articles in local newspapers.

### Was there scope to go further?

Yes. Some would argue that the agreement was made, there were no objections registered, so development should commence. This is true and is the strategy the Government of Samoa chose to adopt. After all, it can be a complex process meeting with different village Matai (chief) and village council, who hold different opinions.

However, such situations are the essence of creating a sustainable and realistic development and should not be ignored. It is the time to foster good relationships with key stakeholders, and would require the Government of Samoa to develop a consultation strategy appropriate for the project and considerate of the Samoan cultural and political system. As the Virtual Consulting Group observed "It is well accepted in Samoa that where Government including the *pulenuu* [Village council representative] undertake grass roots consultation and awareness in villages prior to and during a project, the probability of project success is high (the Virtual Consulting Group (2003))." Governments should not work in isolation from the community;

instead they should concentrate on developing strong relations with the community, which will produce holistic and effective strategies that ultimately bring savings.

If good community consultation strategies were adopted, the project may have produced:

- Increased sense of community involvement;
- Knowledge sharing;
- Identification of cultural and environmental significance sites\*; and
- Potentially avoiding project delay and related economic costs.

(\*During land clearing, road contractors found what they believe is an ancient star mound. Road construction has stopped in this vicinity and the road alignment may need to be realigned to divert around the culturally significant site).

The EDIP in Victoria exemplified how these benefits can foster good relations and ultimately savings to a project.

### **Summary**

Admittedly these are only two examples of planning projects and cannot be entirely representative of the country's commitment of community consultation. The intention is not to show a good and bad example, rather demonstrate the different extent to which community consultation can be employed (or not) in planning processes. The comparison between Samoa and Australia confirms that the extent of community consultation is to a certain degree determined by parliamentary powers. Furthermore, it reinforces that the term 'community consultation' is not explicitly contained within planning legislation and is a responsibility of the planning authority to appropriately interpret, initiate and implement it.

### **Conclusion**

For the savings of community consultation to be realised, it needs to be considered in the initial development stages with a long-term perspective. Planning is an unpredictable process, and if good relations are fostered early on, the project will be more likely to receive community support that is adaptable to unforeseen circumstances.

Planning in Australia has progressed from a service provider role to a community focused discipline. Following the implementation of PUM Act, Samoa is in a unique position where the political powers can adopt Australian methodologies and promote the benefits of good community consultation during the introductory stages of their planning system. There are opportunities to develop community consultation concepts by strengthening relationships between government and existing village and social structures. Furthermore, as learnt by the Virtual Consulting Group "Consensus, negotiation and respect for service to the country, village and family (*tautau*) are important values in Samoan culture."(ibid)

In recent weeks the release of the Draft Strategy for the Development of Samoa 2005-2007 confirmed that Samoa is facing high development pressures, and an increase in foreign investment and tourism (which is emerging as a key sector for Samoa's economic growth) (GOS, 2004:11). For years, tourism has been seen as a threat to the Samoan culture and in response tourism authorities continue to advocate that tourism development must be advanced in a fashion that is consistent with and supportive of the Samoan culture and traditions (GOS, 2002:22).

Planning is the discipline at the forefront of this social and economic tug of war and is the key to ensuring that traditional cultures are not defeated by the influence of foreign investment and tourism. Community consultation should be extensively employed at all Government levels to prevent the potential loss or fragmentation of the Samoan culture. Surely this would be the most significant expense of all, by any measure.



Figure 2: Example of tourism being potential threat to existing Samoan village communities (Source: Author).

### References

- Eildon Alliance 2004 (a) Eildon Dam Improvement Project Environmental Impact Assessment Final Report. Melbourne, Australia.
- Eildon Alliance. 2004 (b). Eildon Dam Improvement Project Community Involvement Plan. Melbourne, Australia.
- Government of Samoa (GOS). 2002. Draft Samoa Tourism Development Plan 2002 – 2006 *a focused future for tourism in Samoa*. Apia, Samoa.
- Government of Samoa (GOS). 2004. Strategy for the development of Samoa 2005 – 2007 Enhancing People’s Choices. Apia, Samoa.
- Howard, M. 2004. The art and the science of the social domain. Responsive and responsible planning. *Australian Planner*, 41(3):16-18.
- Moreland City Council. 2000. Moreland Council Consultation Framework. Melbourne, Australia.
- Perinotto, T. 2004. A new dawn for sustainability. *Australian Financial Review*. 19 October, p59..
- Planning and Urban Management Agency (PUMA). 2004. Salelologa Township Development (Final). Report for PUMA Board.
- Virtual Consulting Group (The). 2003. TA No.3860-SAM Implementation of the Urban Planning and Management Strategy. Draft Final Technical Assistance Report – July 2003. Apia.