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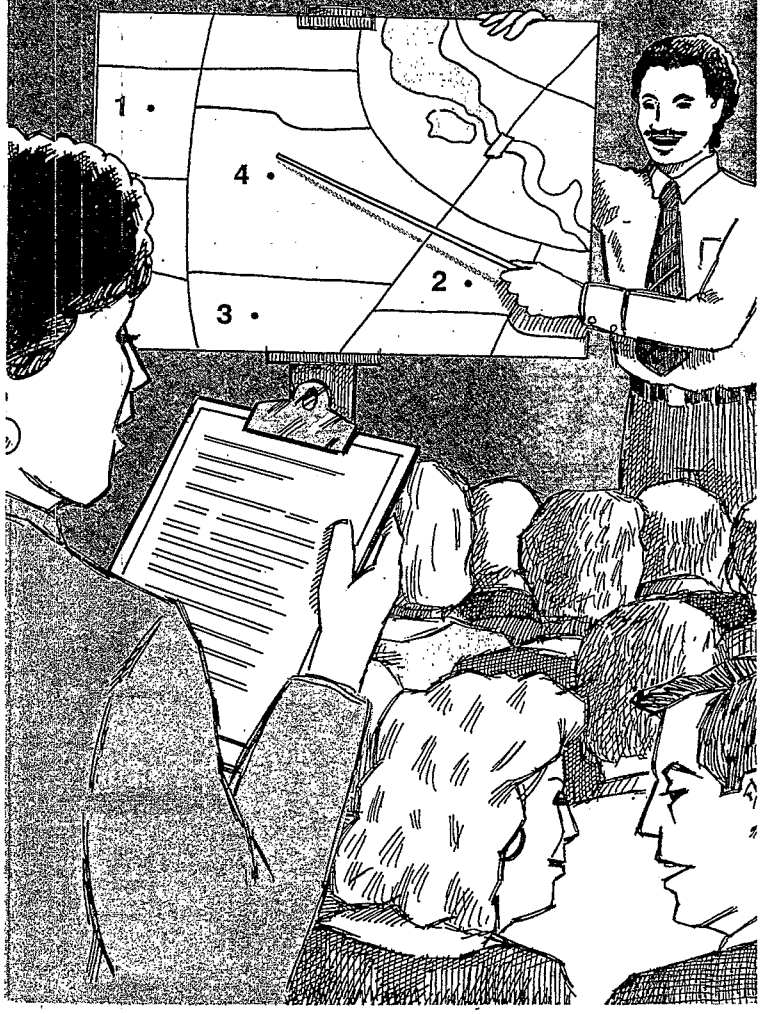
Siting Our Solid Waste:

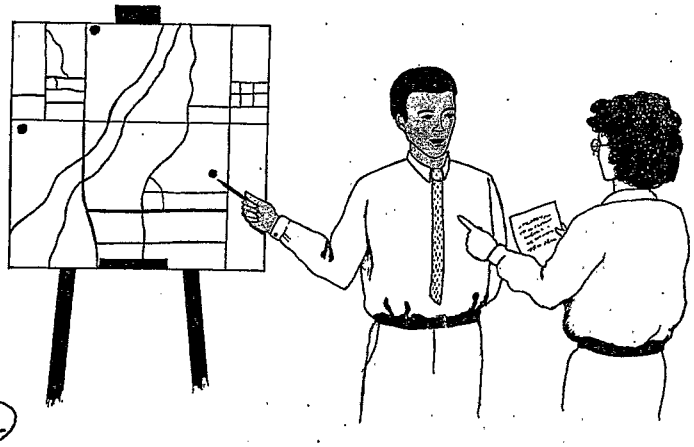
Making Public Involvement Work



Public Involvement Works

Solid waste management has recently become one of the greatest challenges facing local public officials. Confronted with increased amounts of trash needing disposal, closure of existing facilities, and environmental and health concerns associated with past practices, community leaders have found it necessary to locate new sites for waste management facilities. The search for new sites, however, has often been stalled by local residents who don't want a facility in their neighborhood (the NIMBY, or "not in my backyard," syndrome). Consequently, public officials all over the country have encountered conflict and costly delays in siting incinerators, landfills, and even recycling centers.

Some public officials, however, have managed to successfully site environmentally responsible waste management facilities by working with their communities to address solid waste issues. They have learned that involving the public throughout the entire planning and decision-making process is the key to siting an acceptable, safe, and efficient waste management facility. To help local officials involve the public in the siting process, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has published a handbook entitled, *Sites For Our Solid Waste: A Guidebook for Effective Public Involvement.*



1

A New Siting Strategy

In the past, citizens were often not involved in the siting process, and, as a consequence, had little or no say over where a waste management facility was constructed in their community. The facility also may have been sited in a rural or isolated area, where the location would have generated little controversy.

Today, however, many communities must site their facilities in more populated areas, or in locations where the public has planned other uses for the land, such as recreation. As a result, more community residents are directly affected by the siting of a new waste management facility. Because of inadequate designs of earlier facilities and other reasons, many citizens distrust public officials and the siting process, and are now demanding a role in today's siting decisions.

In order for officials to channel citizens' legitimate interest into a constructive dialogue, restore their trust, and resolve conflict, it is necessary to involve the public in the siting process from the very start. This requires extra planning and resources, but should result in a more satisfactory, efficient process.

One of the key components of an effective public involvement plan is allowing an open exchange of information. Officials must listen to and understand citizens' concerns, and in turn, impart credible information to them about the technical issues involved. The NIMBY syndrome represents a culmination of citizens' real concerns related to possible adverse impacts posed by waste management facilities, and cannot be dismissed or ignored. At the same time, citizens need clear and accurate information about their community's waste problems and options.

2

A Comprehensive Plan

Public involvement should be the centerpiece of a comprehensive siting strategy that also includes risk communication, mitigation, and evaluation.

Risk Communication is the two-way exchange of information between public officials and citizens about potential hazards and their effects, as well as how these hazards are perceived by the public and how they might be managed. Risk communication also involves relaying technical information in a credible manner so that the public has all the available information necessary to make an informed decision. It might, for example, entail making an objective and clear presentation on the effectiveness and reliability of a facility's safeguards, and addressing any concerns citizens may have.

The Multidimensional Nature of Facility Siting Issues

People in different areas near a site may have different priorities, and so officials face a myriad of potential concerns:

- Environmental and health risks (such as ground-water pollution; air quality; and transportation of materials)
- Economic issues (such as effect on property values; construction and operating costs; impact on local industry; and compensation plans)
- Social issues (such as equity in site choices; effect on community image; aesthetics; alternative and future land-uses)
- Political issues (such as local elections; vested interests of community groups; responsibility for site management; and local control)

Credibility is the Key

Officials in Wisconsin have addressed the issue of providing credible technical information to the public and gaining their trust. The State of Wisconsin set up an innovative grant program that provides funding for community representatives to hire their own technical consultants. The consultants work on behalf of the citizens to oversee technical studies and communicate information about risks.

Mitigation involves negotiating with citizens to find ways to alleviate potential negative impacts associated with the siting of a waste management facility in their community. Since every siting situation is unique, mitigation requires creative solutions and flexibility. Public officials can help mitigate citizens' fears by listening and responding to their concerns. Officials also should be prepared to negotiate the fine points of how and where the facility will operate.

Evaluation enables public officials to determine whether their strategy is achieving its goals. Evaluating a siting process every step of the way can prevent later conflicts and misunderstandings, and also save money. Some techniques used to evaluate a process include questionnaires, focus groups, and telephone surveys. Evaluation can tell officials whether their public involvement and education programs are working and if there are any gaps in information that need to be filled.

The most effective way to site a waste management facility is for public officials and citizens to work together throughout the process. In the end, however, public officials have the ultimate responsibility for managing their community's solid waste. If you are considering siting a facility, encourage public involvement from the very start.

A Flexible Approach

In the siting of all facilities, officials must be flexible. Several towns have managed to site a facility successfully and reduce potential risks and anxiety by accommodating public concerns. In Northhampton, Massachusetts, public officials limited the number of trips that could be made to the regional landfill by non-local haulers. By taking this action, officials eased residents' concerns about negative impacts on the community. In another case, a developer offered to guarantee the value of residents' property to gain public support for a county landfill.

How to Order

For a free copy of EPA's manual entitled, *Sites for Our Solid Waste: A Guidebook for Effective Public Involvement*, write to: RCRA Information Center, Office of Solid Waste (OS-305), U.S. EPA, 401 M Street SW, Washington, DC 20460, or call EPA's RCRA/Superfund Hotline from 8:30 am to 7:30 pm, EST, Monday through Friday, at (800) 424-9346; for the hearing impaired, the number is TDD (800) 553-7672. In Washington, DC, the number is (202) 382-3000 or TDD (202) 475-9652.

Sites for Our Solid Waste: A Guidebook for Effective Public Involvement

A New Approach to Siting Municipal Solid Waste Facilities

- Facility Siting and the Solid Waste Dilemma
- The Siting Process
- Building a Siting Strategy

Public Involvement

- Who Is the Public?
- Including the Public in the Process
- Techniques for Involving the Public

Risk Communication

- Communicating Risks More Effectively
- Building Credibility for Technical Information

Mitigation

- Mitigating the Negative Impacts

Evaluation

- Evaluating Effectiveness of the Siting Process