A TALE OF TWO TREATMENT PLANTS: LESSONS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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KEYWORDS
Community engagement, lessons learned, wastewater treatment plant, City of Logan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (100 words maximum)
The City of Logan in south east Queensland is one of Australia’s fastest growing local government areas. To service population growth in key development areas in southern Logan, two major wastewater treatment plants have been proposed over the past decade. Logan City Council’s (Council) approach taken to planning these facilities, almost a decade apart, included radically different community engagement programs. This case study reviews the approaches taken, changing government and community attitudes towards infrastructure planning and community engagement, and the (sometimes surprising) outcomes of Council’s engagement programs for the treatment plants.

INTRODUCTION
With more than 320,000 residents, the City of Logan’s population is set to increase dramatically in the coming decade. In part, this is due to urban development in the city’s southern suburbs; an area which features the Queensland Government’s Greater Flagstone and Yarrabilba Priority Development Areas (PDAs). These areas will be home to approximately 200,000 people in the future.

To prepare for growth, the Queensland Government and Logan City Council (Council) have developed several water and wastewater servicing strategies since 2009. Strategies from 2016 have identified opportunities to develop two new regional wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) and associated infrastructure to transport and treat wastewater from the PDAs and other Council-approved development areas.

YEAR CASE STUDY WAS IMPLEMENTED
2010 to 2018

CASE STUDY SUMMARY
Community engagement objectives for the planning of two new WWTPs in the City of Logan, established at least eight years apart, were very different. In 2010, the main objective was to inform community members about a decision to locate a WWTP on 200ha of acquired property in Cedar Grove. In 2018, the main objective was to ask community members what issues Council should consider when searching for a site for a WWTP (known as WWTP B).

Both engagement programs involved distribution of communication materials and community events, with the WWTP B program also including an online ‘Have your Say’ site. Outcomes demonstrated the benefits of a consultative rather than an information-based approach to engagement – though both programs featured misinformation campaigns, community mistrust of government and protests.

CASE STUDY DETAIL
The issue
Community engagement programs were used to support planning of the City of Logan’s two newest WWTPs. These WWTPs were needed to support growth in Queensland Government-designated PDAs and other Council-approved development areas in Logan’s south. Wastewater servicing strategies for this region had highlighted the potential for a ‘two treatment plant strategy’ to meet demand for services as the population increased. A complicating factor associated with the engagement program for the Cedar Grove WWTP was the transfer of Council’s water business to a separate statutory authority called Allconnex Water in 2010, and the subsequent return of the water business to Council in 2012.
The approach
In 2010, the direction to undertake a community engagement program for the Cedar Grove WWTP followed a Council decision to acquire private property for the facility. In 2018, the community engagement program for WWTP B was developed after some earlier preliminary (desktop) planning studies (for the Queensland Government and separately for Council) but before any decision was made about a preferred site for the WWTP.

The community engagement program for WWTP B followed a period of negative publicity, community protest and media commentary about the engagement process undertaken for the Cedar Grove WWTP (refer to Figure 1). More broadly, the engagement program for WWTP B occurred during a period characterised by increased availability of online consultation tools, greater use of social media for communication between Council representatives and constituents, and community mistrust of government decision-making at all levels.

Summary of activities and their implementation
Both community engagement programs for the WWTPs were guided by formal community and stakeholder engagement plans. Under these plans, Council’s corporate and project-based (Logan Water Infrastructure Alliance) community engagement officers delivered a range of communication activities. The nature and timing of these activities are summarised in Table 1. Community engagement for the Cedar Grove WWTP occurred intermittently over a decade, while engagement for the WWTP B was linear.

Summary of outcomes and impacts
Both community engagement programs resulted in a large volume of written and verbal feedback to Council about the planning of WWTPs in Logan. Despite the Cedar Grove WWTP engagement program being information-oriented and the WWTP B program being consultative, both programs attracted negative publicity, misinformation campaigns on social media, community protests and petitions at times (refer to Figure 2). The Cedar Grove WWTP program ultimately resulted in the formation of a Community Reference Group to provide social input on aspects of the facility’s design and construction. The WWTP B program resulted in community nomination of multiple potential WWTP sites (for sale to Council) and it generally enhanced Council’s reputation as a responsive organisation.

Sustainable outcomes
While the first stage(s) of Logan’s two new WWTPs are likely to be of a similar size and design, community involvement in the selection of a site for WWTP B has the potential to deliver more socially and environmentally sustainable infrastructure. This is largely as community feedback was used to identify potential sites, and to develop non-cost criteria for assessing all sites and nominating a preferred site.

Lessons learned and critical success factors
The two different approaches to community engagement for Logan’s newest WWTPs offered many lessons learned for similar projects. These included:

- A lack of community involvement in major infrastructure decision-making can amplify existing mistrust between community members and government.
- Transparency in government decision-making may initially be viewed with scepticism by some community members; particularly if the approach is a departure from ‘business as usual’.
- Community engagement officers need to understand planning and approvals processes, and schedule engagement activities accordingly. Any misalignment can lead to ‘surprise’ releases of information which may result in community mistrust or outrage.
- Openly sharing information with the community about infrastructure drivers, planning processes and technical criteria used to select infrastructure locations (traditionally confidential information) can lead to more useful / practical feedback.
- Misinformation on social media spreads quickly, and can be difficult to address.
- Community members may need support to review, interpret or comment on planning reports and development applications. Openly offering this support can enhance project delivery, even though this may be a departure from the norm for government project teams.
Opinion | Lessons in Cedar Grove sewerage plant plan

PLANNING and construction of the proposed wastewater treatment plant at Cedar Grove is still in the early stages, but already there seem to be lessons for government in community consultation and engagement.

Cedar Grove residents are angry about the plant being located in their suburb. The not-in-my-backyard theme championed by residents is understandable when they are opposing a plant dealing with effluent from elsewhere. Cedar Grove properties have septic tanks, while the wastewater treatment plant is expected to deal with the effluent from properties at Flagstone and maybe further afield.

The plant has been in the works, so to speak, for many years, with Cedar Grove Action Group members saying the first council record they can find of it was from 2008. A council media release dated June 28, 2018 announced council’s endorsement of sewerage infrastructure for the greater Flagstone and Yarrabilba priority development areas and some of Logan’s southern suburbs.

Under the strategy backed by council, sewerage from most of Flagstone and Jimboomba would be transferred to a new plant at Cedar Grove, for which land was acquired in 2011. Further, councillors supported the building of a second plant to service Yarrabilba, Logan Village, Greenbank, North Maclean, Park Ridge and part of Chambers Flat. At that time, council was yet to confirm where that plant would be located. The Cedar Grove plant was to come online in 2019, according to that statement.

Some Cedar Grove residents say they received a letter in 2013 about the plant and a further five years later, in May this year. They say that is the extent of the communication from government. It is no wonder they feel neglected.

Council, meanwhile, is suggesting that at least some of the blame should go to the state government, which is referring residents and media back to council. Where the buck stops remains to be seen.

Figure 1: Editorial in the Jimboomba Times, 2 November 2017
### Table 1: Comparison of key community engagement activities for planning the two WWTPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cedar Grove WWTP</th>
<th>WWTP B</th>
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| 2010 | • Media release and website information announcing planning of the Cedar Grove WWTP (on a preferred site).  
      • Direct engagement with land owners to acquire the site.  
      • Queensland Government information campaign about declaration of PDAs (showing the Cedar Grove WWTP site). | No activity |
| 2011 | • Media release updating planning activities.  
      • Direct mail letter and information sheet to 100 residents adjacent to the site about planning.  
      • Website information.  
      • Project information sign on site. | |
| 2012 | • Letter to 100 adjacent residents advising of project deferral for four years. | |
| 2013 to 2015 | No activity | |
| 2016 | • Media release on wastewater servicing strategy for PDAs and other Council-approved development areas. | |
| 2017 | • Direct mail letter and information sheet to 300 adjacent residents and community groups advising of project re-start.  
      • Media release about project re-start.  
      • Project page on website.  
      • Four community meetings to address community concerns. | • Engagement with elected representatives about the project’s community engagement process. |
| 2018 | • Media release announcing a statutory public notification period (for a development application).  
      • Direct mail letter to 900 Cedar Grove residents about statutory notification period, a community information day and how to nominate for a Community Reference Group (CRG).  
      • Media release and social media posts about community information day and CRG.  
      • Project information signs on site.  
      • Community information day and tours of the WWTP site.  
      • Formation of CRG and commencement of CRG meetings.  
      • Direct mail letter to 900 Cedar Grove residents with a project update and offer of tours of other WWTPs.  
      • Tour of other WWTPs in south east Queensland for the CRG and other Cedar Grove residents.  
      • Works notification to 1,000 Cedar Grove residents announcing start of construction.  
      • Community tree planting / revegetation day on site (planned at time of writing abstract). | • Direct mail letter to 10,000 residents and property owners announcing a community consultation period.  
      • Media briefing.  
      • Media release announcing the community consultation period.  
      • Social media posts inviting feedback.  
      • Direct emails to community groups inviting feedback.  
      • ‘Have your Say’ online consultation site.  
      • Project web page and updates.  
      • Three drop-in community information stalls.  
      • Stakeholder meetings.  
      • Media release announcing close of initial consultation period.  
      • Use of community feedback to develop selection criteria and assess potential WWTP sites.  
      • Public release of community consultation report (planned at time of writing abstract).  
      • Public release of WWTP siting study (planned at time of writing abstract). |
Figure 2: Protests were a feature of both engagement programs, as depicted in these Jimboomba Times headlines (full articles are available at www.jimboombatimes.com.au)