

## **A Case Study for Engagement with Passionate Groups: Rail Crossings on the Caulfield to Dandenong Railway Line.**

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### **Abstract**

Organisations are becoming increasingly aware that community consultation not only 'ticks the box' in terms of inclusiveness, but if done properly provides better outcomes for both the community and the organisation.

A well thought through consultation strategy applied in the early stages of a project provides local insights on issues and solutions that engineers who are removed from the local area may not foresee. It also lessens the risk of lengthy delays due to community concerns over what may be thought to be an unacceptable solution.

VicRoads developed a consultation strategy to capture community sentiment about the issues associated with the 11 rail crossings along the Caulfield to Dandenong railway line. Reported waiting times in excess of 30 minutes at some of the crossings and the associated risk taking by some road users made these crossings a highly emotive issue.

Under these circumstances, community consultation can sometimes be hostile and unproductive. The Caulfield to Dandenong rail crossing consultation strategy not only avoided conflict with the community, but resulted in the community expressing its appreciation on having an opportunity to have their say on something they were so passionate about.

The consultation strategy incorporated a variety of communication tools with built in flexibility to ensure the best outcomes for both the community and the project.

Some of the key aspects of the consultation strategy included in this paper are:

- Having clear consultation objectives;
- Managing community expectations of the consultation and of the project;
- Varied and flexible communication mechanisms so that the community has the best opportunity to input into the project;
- Having well thought out questions to ask the community and clearly written communications;
- Ensuring that the consultation isn't dominated by a few individuals and instead everyone is given an opportunity to have their say.

# 1. Introduction

There are many disaster stories relating to community consultations that have gone astray when passionate groups want to make their point and be heard. While the authors do not claim to be experts in this regard, this paper represents a good example of a consultation where a passionate group of people were encouraged to have their say in a constructive way. What could have been a disastrous situation ultimately ended with the group applauding VicRoads for listening to them. Hopefully there are a number of principles applied here that people are able to take away and try for themselves.

This paper outlines the community engagement strategy that was developed and implemented by VicRoads in order to involve the community in a study of the 11 rail crossings on the Caulfield to Dandenong railway line in the South East Suburbs of Melbourne. The study investigated future improvement opportunities for these 11 rail crossings. These rail crossings are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Rail Crossings on the Caulfield to Dandenong Railway Line



Local residents and commuters who used these rail crossings report waiting for up to 30 minutes during peak times in order to negotiate the worst of these crossings. This has a considerable impact on the lives of local residents and consequently there is considerable passion around this topic. For example see “Railway crossing blitz”, Waverly Leader 20 September 2011.

An important aspect of the engagement activity was that it was in support of a study of improvement opportunities as opposed to a committed improvement project. Managing community expectations in relation to future outcomes was therefore critical.

## 2. Developing a Vision for Effective Participation

A project team of key internal stakeholders was established to assist in the development of the engagement strategy. The first task of the project team was to determine the following fundamental aspects of the consultation:

- What is the purpose: How does this engagement activity add value to the study and to those who participate in the engagement activity? In other words what's in it for us and what's in it for the participants?
- Who are the major stakeholder/community groups that we need to engage with?
- To what extent can decisions be influenced through this engagement process?
- What are the risks and challenges associated with the engagement?

Through discussion around these key points it was concluded that there were a number of areas where the community could meaningfully contribute to the study.

These included:

- Provision of information on the impact that the crossings have on the community which could influence prioritisation of any future improvement works.
- Provision of local ideas particularly for short term improvements to the crossings, and to a lesser extent longer term improvements.
- Provision of information on the aspects of the local environment that are valued by the community to assist with scoping possible future engineering improvement works.

There were many key stakeholder organisations that were included in the study such as Local and State Government organisations, transport companies, retail trader groups etc, but the two main community groups that were identified were local residents and commuters who used the crossings on a regular basis.

It was accepted that the delays experienced by the community at the rail crossings were significant and that they would have legitimate right to express their concerns over this issue.

The key challenges faced by the Project Team were therefore:

- Managing community expectations in terms of commitments and timeframes for improvements to the crossings and,
- Engaging with a community that has issues of high concern.

This led us to the following objectives for the engagement strategy:

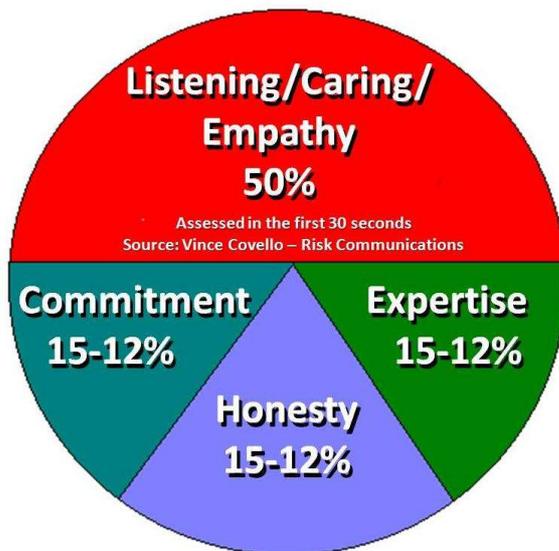
- To conduct meaningful engagement with local residents and road and rail-based commuters who regularly use the rail crossings on the Caulfield to Dandenong railway line.
- To collect information that would:
  - Contribute to the prioritisation of potential improvement works;
  - Generate ideas for possible short and long term solutions;
  - Provide the community's views on the constraints that should be applied to potential engineering works.
- To ensure the community is properly informed of the purpose of the engagement and to manage expectations of the study outcome.
- To build trust with the community that peoples concerns and opinions would be recorded and considered in the study.

We would be seeking to work directly with the public to ensure that their concerns and aspirations were consistently understood and considered. This is consistent with the "Involve" category of IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum (See IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum: © 2004 International Association for Public Participation).

### 3. Preparing for Engagement

The rail crossings are an issue of high concern for local residents living along side the railway line between Caulfield and Dandenong. [see “Railway crossing blitz”, Waverly Leader 20 September 2011.] A key objective of the consultation was therefore to build trust with the community that their concerns and opinions would be recorded and considered in the study.

**Figure 1. Trust Determining Factors in High Concern Situations**



In designing the engagement strategy, the work of Dr. Vincent Covello, the founder and Director of the Centre for Risk Communication was utilised. Figure 1. shows the factors which greatly influence trust in high concern situations such as this.

While demonstrating expertise and commitment is very important, it is clear that listening and displaying genuine care and empathy for the impact that the crossings have on people’s lives is a critical element of the engagement process.

This display of care and empathy can’t be just reserved for face to face meetings, but must be embedded into all communications whether it be in letterbox drops, receiving phone calls to book into a workshop or email responses.

#### 3.1 Clarity of Messages

Clear and concise messages were used in all communications, which focused on achieving the objectives of the project. Written communications were tailored for each target audience and simple language used with minimal engineering terms. See Bojinka Bishop, (2003) for further information of the importance of this aspect of communications.

For example the “Caulfield to Dandenong Rail Crossing Study” was a name specifically developed for the communications associated with this community engagement project. The actual engineering study was called the “Dandenong Rail Corridor Study”. The Project Team considered this to be inappropriate as it did not convey that we were referring to the rail crossings located between Caulfield and Dandenong.

#### 3.2 Key Messages

A set of key messages were developed to ensure the communications were consistent and focused on the project objectives. Some examples of these key messages include:

- VicRoads is conducting a high-level study of 11 rail crossings between Grange Road, Caulfield East and South Gippsland Highway, Dandenong on the Cranbourne/Pakenham line (excluding Springvale Road).

- The study will investigate the feasibility of improvements and grade separation options at each of the locations.
- There are no commitments at this stage to implement any improvement ideas.
- We would like to hear about your experiences with these 11 rail crossings and any issues or ideas you may have. You can have your say by participating in the online discussion forum or by attending a community workshop. At the community workshop we will be discussing the rail crossings in your local area.
- We will be consolidating all of the information received into a community consultation summary report. This report will be considered in the development of recommendations for future improvements at these crossings.

### 3.3 Asking the Right Questions

The Project Team received a number of very favourable comments internally about the breadth and depth of the information received from the community. This was not a coincidence; a lot of time was put into developing clear and concise questions which would provide qualitative information, not just facts and figures.

For example it would be tempting to simply ask:

*“How long do you have to wait at this rail crossing?”*

In reality we already had a good knowledge of this through measurement of boom-gate closure times and queuing times. A far more insightful question was:

*“How does this rail crossing impact your life?”*

The following questions were used consistently across all the engagement activities in this project:

- How does this crossing impact your life?
- What else is important to you about the area?
- What short term ideas do you have to improve the crossing?
- What long term ideas do you have to improve the crossing?

The second question above was intended to identify whether there were any local physical characteristics (for example, on-street parking, shops, parkland, etc) that the community felt should be preserved when considering future improvement opportunities. Also, as the question implies, it gave the community an opportunity to tell us anything else that they felt passionate about that didn't fit into one of our standard categories.

## 4. Engagement Mechanisms

It was thought that community workshops held at suitable locations near the rail crossings would be attractive to many local residents, however this may not suit commuters. An online forum would give commuters a more convenient mechanism to participate, while also providing the local community with an alternative to the workshop.

The variety of engagement mechanisms we used were:

- Face to face meetings with major stakeholders;
- Community engagement workshops;
- Website and online forum;
- Email;
- Post; and
- Phone.

Local residents were informed of the engagement mechanisms through a letter placed in all letter boxes within a 0.5 km radius of each of the rail crossings, along with advertisements placed in the local newspapers.

The local newspaper advertisements also captured the attention of commuters who used the crossings but lived some distance away. The community were referred to the project website for more detailed information.

The local Municipal Councils also assisted with the promotion.

#### **4.1 Community Workshops**

To ensure the engagement was highly participative a number of fundamental principles were adapted. The following principles encouraged people to come along to the workshops and removed impediments to participation once they were in attendance.

- Making attendance attractive to the community;
- Creating a cooperative and trusting environment;
- Providing sufficient information to enable the community to understand how to contribute meaningfully; and
- Making it easy for everyone to contribute.

##### Attracting Participants

In high concern situations there is not usually any problem attracting participants to a workshop. However there was still considerable effort taken to promote the engagement in such a way that the community could see benefit from attending, and to ensure that the venue was convenient and comfortable and that there was appropriate catering for an evening event.

Our workshops were designed for 60 participants, who were required to register their attendance. The workshops were so popular that we felt obliged to run two workshops at our first location, both of which were fully booked.

A potentially disastrous situation arose with the first workshop when unregistered people arrived expecting to attend the workshop. Our initial strategy of asking those unregistered people to wait to see if any of those who registered didn't turn up, was revised as more and more people arrived. The crowd grew more frustrated and angry as more and more local residents gathered outside the venue.

When the crowd reached 150 a decision was made to let everyone into the venue, explaining that it would be very crowded and there was a need to be considerate of others in such a crowded space. The venue held 60 people comfortably; 150 was an extremely tight fit.

### Creating a Cooperative and Trusting Environment

The opening address to a crowd of 150 frustrated people in a venue designed for 60 is a critical one. The theory of Vince Covello proved invaluable for building trust in what was truly a high concern situation.

The audience can pick up genuine empathy and in this situation a trusting and cooperative environment was created through genuine expressions and subsequent actions of the following kind:

*“Thank you for your patience .....*”

*“We understand that there are issues with ..... and this impacts on.....”*

*“We are here to listen.”*

*“We would like to hear about ..... and get your views on .....*”

### Providing Sufficient Information to Enable the Audience to Contribute Meaningfully

While we were empathetic to the community’s issues and concern, we were very clear about the nature and scope of the engagement.

A member of the Project Team gave an overview of various aspects of the study, emphasising the timeframes involved, how the engagement activities fitted in with the study, the areas where community input would be most valuable, and most importantly that there was no commitment or budget allocated at this point in time to implement any of the findings.

An early comment from the audience, “If you’re not going to do any of the things we suggest then we may as well leave now”, was responded to by the facilitator with a re-emphasis of the nature of the engagement and the words “it’s your choice to attend or not, but it would be a pity not to have your input into this study”. Nobody left the room.

Commitments were given that the community’s input would be recorded and given due consideration in the study. Also that a report summarising the community’s input would be made available from the project website.

### Making it Easy to Contribute

Good facilitation involves clear instructions on the process that will take place to enable the audience to participate, and the establishment of ground rules to ensure the process runs smoothly and everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.

In high concern situations engagement can often be dominated by a vocal minority. This is particularly an issue with engagement techniques such as public meetings and even small group discussions.

The process adopted for our community workshops is referred to as a “gallery”. In this technique participants walk around a room with a texta in hand and write their responses to pre-determined questions on broadsheets. The advantages of the gallery technique are:

- All attendees, even those with a reserved personality who may not normally speak up at a public meeting, feel at ease writing their thoughts down.
- Attendees can see other people’s comments and agree (by adding a tick) or disagree (by adding a cross) or write completely independent comments.

- It avoids the vocal minority from dominating the engagement activity.
- It is scalable; even with 150 people in a room designed for 60, everyone was able to get their views across; it just took a little bit longer than normal.

Following the gallery there were some small group exercises to identify and discuss any points that needed further clarification. Apart from clarifying issues, this enabled community members to debate some of the views expressed by other participants.

### Outcomes from the Workshop

We ran three workshops with a total of 280 participants and over 1000 independent statements collected through the gallery sessions.

The workshops were very participative and extremely successful. The highlight occurred at the very first workshop where 150 participants who were initially very annoyed and crowded into a relatively small venue were asked to provide feedback on the process they had just been taken through. One member of audience stood up and congratulated VicRoads for enabling so many people to have their say. This was followed by applause from the other participants.

## **4.2 Web Site and Online Forum**

### Process

The web page containing the online forum was the focal point for our customer communications. We were able to give the community access to maps, diagrams, and other information which meant that they were better informed.

Given that the target audience for the engagement included both locals and commuters from outside the local area, the online forum gave everyone a convenient alternative to attending a community workshop if they wanted to have their say or join in a discussion with others.

The online forum prompted participants to respond to the same questions that were asked at the community workshops, thereby providing a high level of integration between these two engagement mechanisms. An interesting parallel between the online forum and the “gallery” style community workshop is that in both cases participants can view and comment on other peoples opinions and engage in dialogue be it either face to face or online.

### Outcomes from the Online Forum

The online forum was open for a six week period. After a slow start the comments and discussion between participants became very frequent with 180 comments posted altogether. It seemed that no one wanted to be the first to enter a comment.

The online comments complemented those received at the community workshops and ensured that we had covered our target audience. We received different perspectives from people and gained participation from a larger range of ages and backgrounds.

For example one L-Plate driver said "I logged 55 minutes into my Learner's Log Book for covering a distance of 1km. This was because I was stuck in Clayton's permanent gridlock while the station boom-gates were down".

About a quarter of our community workshop bookings came through the online booking system on the web page. The two activities were integrated with a number of people participating in both the workshops and the online forum.

### **4.3 Letters, Email, Phone Calls**

The community was also invited to participate via email, phone and letter. Although not used as frequently, in general the information provided via these mechanisms was more detailed than that received via the workshops or the online forum.

Altogether we received 60 emails, 12 letters and 16 phone calls. The phone calls that the community made to register for the community workshops were in addition to these 16 calls.

## **5. Reporting**

### **5.1 Community Consultation Report**

Producing a summary document that captured the diverse range of community views over eleven individual rail crossings was a significant challenge. Comments that related to similar experiences were consolidated into one statement that best described the experience. Where possible a number was provided next to each statement to depict the number of times that the particular comment or similar comment had occurred.

The following comments reflect the diversity of input received from the community in terms of the way the rail crossings impact their lives.

*"I have waited at the crossing on some mornings for up to twelve trains to pass through; not one after the other but a good 3 to 4 minutes between them!" (3)*

*"The 'no right turn' sign is not being respected by many drivers, and those that do not turn right because of the red arrow can sometimes be abused. (2)*

*"Ordering a pizza when you live on the other side of the crossing is a nightmare; unless you like cold pizza"*

*"This lively shopping strip currently includes an increasing amount of outdoor cafes. It is very important to retain the visual and functional nature of Koornang Road" (30)*

### **5.2 Dissemination of the Report**

After completing the summary report it became clear that its contents would be valuable not only to the engineers involved in the project but other engineers involved in day to day traffic management. Consequently, all of the engineers within the Region were invited to a presentation of the consultation findings to ensure that the business could get maximum value from the report.

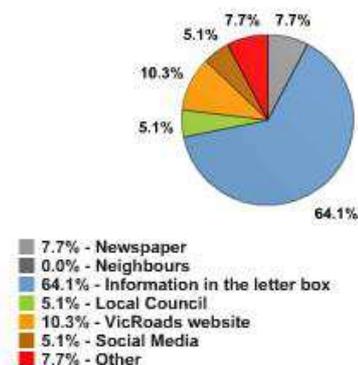
One of the engineers was alerted by a comment in the report from a person who was continually having trouble selecting a gap in the traffic to make a right hand turn. The engineer investigated the programming of a set of traffic signals located near one of the rail crossings and discovered a programming error that had been there for approximately two years. Once located, the error was fixed immediately.

## 6. Feedback and Lessons Learned

### 6.1 How Did People Hear About the Study?

A quick poll taken on the project website revealed that 64% of those that logged into the website had learnt about the Caulfield to Dandenong Rail Crossing Study via the letterbox drop. While there is some bias towards computer savvy people in this measurement, it is felt that this result justifies the extra cost associated with the letterbox drops when compared to the other forms of promotion used.

How did you hear about the Caulfield to Dandenong Rail Crossing Study?



### 6.2 Feedback from the Community on the Engagement Process

The community was given the opportunity to provide feedback on the overall engagement process. Participants provided comments through the online forum, in person at the workshops and through letters. The Project Team also distributed evaluation forms at the workshops.

Many people were complimentary about the engagement process and almost everyone felt that they had been given an opportunity to share their views. It suggests that the strategy and subsequent processes adapted for engaging with the community on issues of high concern had been effective.

Comments in relation to things that worked well at the workshops include:

- *On time, clear directions, kept things going and participative.*
- *There was a ready ear by your staff.*
- *Specific responses taken for specific crossings.*
- *Good process being able to freely move around, write down your own views, discuss with others, and see others views.*
- *The process allowed everyone to get their view down, without domination by the "usual suspects".*
- *The process takes the heat out of the discussion.*

Comments in relation to things that could be improved about the workshops include:

- *Smaller groups to get the main points across.*
- *Member of Parliament should be present.*
- *It would have been better if we had a Council representative to speak for 5 minutes.*

Other comments received about the workshops include:

- *"The workshop I attended on 8/9/2011 was well planned with good, clear presentation. The crowd was well managed and able to present their opinions quite energetically with the power of the text".*
- *"May I congratulate you on the conduct of the meeting it was very fair to all".*
- *"It's really good to see the effort that VicRoads is going to, to consult with the community".*

- *“Thank you for the opportunity to join in the discussion on Thursday 15th September. Congratulations to the organisers”.*

Not everyone was happy. A major inhibitor to effective engagement is often a poor engagement experience in the past. The following comment is likely to reflect this.

*“Wake up you lamb-brained morons. We don’t all have a @\$%!!! computer. We use POST and @\$% all will come of this “STUDY” because we know that the decision has already been made. You talk too much in public.”*

Although not the case with this study, the above comment does reinforce the fundamental principle of early engagement with the community before decisions are made.

### **6.3 Workshops Vs Online Forum**

Both the Community workshops and the online forum were very successful and complemented each other. The workshops attracted 280 participants while the online forum received 180 individual comments.

The information collected in the community workshops was very focused, however observation suggested that the workshops attracted an older demographic.

While the questions posed in the online forum were the same as that in the community workshops, the responses were more diverse and based on the nature of the comments one could assume a more diverse demographic.

Overall the two mechanisms worked well together.

### **6.4 Breakdown of Time Spent**

The amount of time taken to prepare the consultation reports was very much underestimated in planning this project. As indicated below, report writing accounted for about 40% of the total engagement project time. This is understandable when considering that there was a high participation rate for the engagement and that the project required analysis of the community’s views on eleven individual rail crossings.

Breakdown of time spent on the engagement activity:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| • Strategy Planning:                      | 15% |
| • Preparation & Development of Materials: | 35% |
| • Engagement Activities:                  | 5%  |
| • Report Writing:                         | 40% |
| • Dissemination of Report:                | 5%  |

## **7. Conclusion**

It is important that a well thought through consultation strategy is applied in the early stages of a project and that the community and key stakeholders have the opportunity to have their say in projects that affect them.

The Caulfield to Dandenong Rail Crossing Consultation Strategy demonstrates that even in situations of high concern where passionate groups are involved the consultation process can be a positive experience for all.

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