Building Community Support for New Jail Construction

By Gail Elias

NEW JAIL PLANNING

Bulletin From the Jails Division of the National Institute of Corrections

During the 20 or so years that the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) has offered the Planning of New Institutions (PONI) program, "How can we sell the jail?" has been a constant theme. The process of building community support for a new jail has three essential elements: information, involvement, and methods. Support-building efforts that ignore any of these elements are likely to experience significant setbacks, if not failure.

The Challenge

Jail construction projects present challenges from onset to occupancy. Among the most significant are those related to building support for the project. Although people often talk about this issue as "selling the project," it is much more than a marketing or sales problem. At the heart of the issue is the harsh reality that jails have few natural constituencies, and those that do exist may have relatively little political influence. Think about the difference between jail and school construction projects. A school project has broad, natural constituencies (parents, teachers) and very sympathetic beneficiaries (children). A jail project can count on jail staff as supporters, but their numbers are relatively small, and many people do not feel particularly sympathetic to the inmate population.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Building community support for new jail construction is not a popular topic among policymakers or between policymakers and their local constituents. Nevertheless, local governments have a public obligation to build and maintain jails that are safe and secure, hold inmates accountable, and provide services necessary for inmates to reenter the community successfully.

The local jail plays a critical role in the community. The intent of this bulletin is to guide policymakers and local stakeholders in a direction that will help them build support for their local jail and dispel the myths surrounding local jail construction.

**Morris L. Thigpen, Sr., Director
National Institute of Corrections**

Why Jail Projects Need Community Support

Most jail projects, even those that are fully funded, need supporters. Why?

- **Being a good neighbor.** Many jails are located in government centers, industrial areas, and mixed-use areas. A jail may be next to other public and private facilities, and it may have residential neighbors. Without support from the jail's new neighbors, siting problems are inevitable.

- **Competing for resources.** Every jurisdiction must make choices regarding the best use of available capital and operating dollars. To ensure adequate resources to address the jail's problems, elected officials must be encouraged to support what is often perceived as a "politically unpopular" cause and make a commitment that may mean deferring expenditures on more popular projects.

- **Gaining voters' support.** Many jurisdictions do not have the financial or legal means to construct a jail without passing a bond issue. The public may have to choose among many initiatives on the ballot, and the general economic climate may affect their choices. Proponents of the jail project will need to build support that translates into approval in the voting booth.

- **Conveying necessity.** Even if funding is not an issue, most elected officials will not want to end their political careers by supporting an unpopular project. The public must agree that the jail is necessary; they must be convinced of the "rightness" of the project.

All of these scenarios relate to the basic need for support, although each may result in a somewhat different approach. How the need for support is perceived can shape the approach taken. Is the purpose to…

- **Sell the project?** As consumers, people have different reactions to "selling." All projects need strong advocates who are willing to speak up for the project in public. These advocates must also be willing to listen to their audience.

- **Educate people about the project?** Education should focus on the need, the options, and the solutions. The assumption is that rational people will support the project once they participate in an educational process. Adults often learn better through interaction and discussion rather than lectures.

- **Inform people about the project?** As with education, the assumption is that people will support the project once they know the facts. However, the information must not flow just one way: problems arise when people feel they have a considerable stake in the outcome but no opportunity for input.

- **Involve people in the project?** Involving people implies an interactive relationship in which interested parties have opportunities to express opinions and potentially have input into the process. People tend to support what they help to create, even if they disagree with some of the results.

Building support for a project involves all of the above—in different degrees at different stages of the project. Although the "right" approach varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, education and information are the foundation for building stronger levels of support for any project, and any approach is more likely to succeed if it emphasizes two-way communication.

In This Bulletin

This bulletin provides an overview of a support-building process that can be adapted to any jail project. The bulletin discusses methods for building support and getting the word out. It addresses both strategies (broad approaches, such as education and involvement) and tactics (means of implementing a strategy, such as community meetings and jail tours). It also provides examples of how several diverse communities used this process.

Raising the Issue

Jail construction projects begin in a variety of ways. An outside event (e.g., litigation, escalating pressure from inspectors) may set things in motion. The trigger may be a serious incident or crowding, perhaps combined with the costs of boarding inmates in other jails. Typically, a few people come to realize that *something* has to be done, and a small group begins to talk about the issue. This conversation starts inside the agency that operates the jail but soon spreads to other parts of the justice system and local government. At this point, the problem's scope is undefined and its impact is unknown. Strategies may begin to surface but they are not evaluated. Liability concerns may make people reluctant to acknowledge the problem (see below), but the small group who initiated the conversation share the realization that the problem is unlikely to go away on its own.

At this time, the project is like a pebble dropped in a lake. There is only a slight disturbance where it hits the water. What may be widely known inside the operating agency is barely a topic of conversation in local government offices. Unless a serious incident triggered the conversation, it is "no news" in the local media and not yet a "blip" on the community's radar

screen. Unless those who have a stake in the outcome take action, that is how things will remain.

Overcoming Inertia

People often regard jails as necessary evils and do not have much interest in (or knowledge of) them. Many think of jails and prisons as the same thing. Public perceptions of jails often are based on television and movie portrayals that do not reflect contemporary jail operations or

design. These fictional accounts also tend to focus on the sensational, which can increase community fears about jails.

Before people can be convinced to care about the jail, they first need to understand the jail's critical role in the justice system and the community. For the justice system, the jail serves two key functions:

■ Pretrial detention, ensuring a defendant's availability for court processing if bond is not used.

Increasing Public Awareness

Key Questions for Early Community Discussions

■ What would happen if there was no jail?
  - What options would the courts have to sanction people who don't obey the law?
  - Where would we hold potentially dangerous people while they go through the court process?
■ What is the responsibility of the jail:
  - To the community?
  - To inmates?
  - To staff?
  - To the justice system?

  (One can also ask the reverse of all these questions.)

Video Tool From NIC

The National Institute of Corrections has developed a 20-minute film, "Beyond the Myths: The Jail in Your Community," which provides information about jails in general and the importance of community interest in the jail. This video is an excellent vehicle for community discussions about the local jail and the critical role it plays in public safety. For more information about the video, go to http://nicic.org/Library/018696.

- Short-term sentences, when the court orders some form of incarceration for a convicted offender who is not eligible for a prison sentence.

Jails are also part of a larger "social contract" between government and the governed. For the community, the jail is part of a public safety system that:

- Manages the behavior of inmates in the institution and potentially in the community—most immediately by separating them from the community for a period of time and perhaps by offering programs and services that may affect their future behavior.

- Holds defendants accountable for the behavior that triggered their incarceration.

If the jail cannot carry out these functions, it may become the weakest link in the chain, compromising the other organizations that play a role in public safety. For example, the police may not be able to arrest certain types of offenders, and the courts may not be able to use jail incarceration as a sanction.

At the beginning of a jail planning project, the small group of concerned officials needs to raise public awareness about the importance of the jail's relationship to the community. One way to do this is to discuss questions about

the responsibility of the jail to its various constituencies (and vice versa). These discussions can be held in formal settings (e.g., community meetings or focus groups) and informally (e.g., over coffee at a local gathering place).

Acknowledging the Problem

Some people within the agency or in local government may be reluctant to acknowledge that a problem exists. As the small group of concerned officials begins its efforts to raise public awareness about the jail, it may also need to address this reluctance. It is helpful to keep in mind that (1) people do not want to change until the pain associated with changing is less than the pain associated with not changing, and (2) people will neither care about nor support a solution until they understand something about the problem and why action is preferable to doing nothing.

Some officials who are responsible for the local jail may not want to acknowledge a problem because they think doing so will somehow increase their liability. However, ignoring a problem does not eliminate liability (the phrase "knew or should have known" is common in litigation), and the most likely litigants—inmates—are well aware of the problem firsthand.

Additionally, people who work in law enforcement or jail environments often think of themselves as problem solvers and may not want to admit that the solution to the "jail problem" is not entirely within their control. Even though it is often difficult for those closest to the problem not to move immediately to a solution, that is exactly what is called for in the early stages of the process. Shared understanding of the nature and consequences of the problem is a prerequisite for a consensus about its solution. Arriving at that shared understanding may take a long time, but it is the foundation for what comes later.

Developing a Strategy To Get the Message Out

The Core Group

Once the problem is acknowledged, the jurisdiction may consider moving from an informal group (e.g., representatives of the jail-operating agency and local government) to a more formal group such as a criminal justice coordinating or advisory committee. This committee, or "core group," should include representatives from key elements of the justice system and key constituencies within the community.

Before appointing the formal committee, the core group should have a direct conversation with each potential committee member,

Going Public With the Problem

At this point in the process, the jail project will probably still be "operating below the radar." It may be possible to use the occasion of establishing the core group to announce the problem to the larger community. Some jurisdictions use press releases or other "resolutions" to raise the issue.

For More Information

Additional information on working with criminal justice advisory groups is available through NIC's Information Center (www.nicic.org).

covering the committee's responsibility and authority, the resources available to it, and general expectations. It will be necessary to actively seek out these participants. Community members may be reluctant to volunteer—particularly if they have concerns about governmental involvement in this process.

This core group may become the project's information highway into the community, so it is important to think strategically in determining its members. Members should be people who (1) have a stake in a successful outcome for the project and (2) hold key positions in groups whose policies and practices can affect jail capacity.

Keeping in mind that **this is the first opportunity to build a support infrastructure for the project,** planners should make a list of all groups that:

- Have a stake in the outcome of the project.
- Are likely to support the project.
- Are likely to oppose the project.
- Are influential in the community.

The local league of women voters, council of churches, and law enforcement and corrections unions are a few examples of such groups. Even if some of these groups are not invited to participate at this point, planners should keep the list for later use.

The committee's initial activities often predate formal project planning efforts. Committee members first need to understand the role of the jail and the nature of the problem. A tour of the current facility is a good start. The "tour guide" must be able to point out deficiencies and problems, because committee members who are unfamiliar with jails are unlikely to understand the implications of what they are seeing. They may also be processing what they see in the context of their own inaccurate perceptions of jails.

The Focus

The focus at this stage should be:

- What is the problem?
- What resources do we have now (i.e., facilities and alternatives)?
- What is wrong with what we have?
- Why should we change?
- What are some of the options?

This phase is educational and informational. It focuses on the problem, not the solutions. However, this phase probably will raise many questions (e.g., What do we need? What are the options?) that push the planning group toward solutions. It is important not to respond to these questions prematurely, but rather to record the questions and begin the process of getting the information needed to answer them.

This "consciousness-raising" phase usually leads to a more formal needs assessment and potentially a master plan. Then the project is ready to move to the next level of support-building activities.

Building a Case for Support

This part of the process begins with a clear statement of the problem and ends with a tentative solution. It involves gathering information, assessing need, exploring options, and developing a strategy for widening the base of support for the project.

Gathering Information and Assessing Need

Because jails are so expensive to construct and operate, few new jails are built without first exploring other ways of solving the problem. Jurisdictions build jails for three reasons:

- The existing jail structure is damaged, worn out, or otherwise no longer suitable. The jurisdiction may decide to improve, modify, or replace the jail.
- The existing jail no longer "fits" the jurisdiction's need (e.g., the jail is crowded). It is important to understand that building a new jail is not the only option for solving this kind of problem.
- The existing building cannot be operated efficiently and does not provide for effective inmate supervision. For example, inappropriately sized housing units result in staffing inefficiencies and linear-style design makes supervision difficult.

Regardless of the reason for considering a new jail, planners must thoroughly analyze the facts: information about the physical plant, requirements of current standards and case law, contemporary jail practices, and data about the inmate population.

During this information-gathering and needs assessment process, planners will develop a context for the project, describe how the jail is currently used, document existing conditions and analyze issues, and determine long-term implications.

Context

The jail does not exist in a vacuum; it is part of the criminal justice system, which in turn is part of the community. The jail's problems probably did not occur overnight, and people will want to know what led to the current situation. A good analysis of trends will reveal the factors that contributed to the problems. In conducting this analysis, the core planning group may ask the following questions:

- Does the physical plant have problems? What are they?
- Are maintenance issues increasing? (Consider the age of the facility and the implications of 24–7 operations as a part of the context.)
- Has the average daily inmate population increased to the

extent that inmates are boarded out? How does this change relate to the length of stay and admissions?

- What factors led to these changes?

Current Use

This type of information is referred to as an "inmate profile." It should do more than simply describe the demographic characteristics and criminal background of the jail population. It needs a wider perspective that includes the justice system's alternatives for managing the population that "uses" jail space. Such a perspective will help planners define the type of beds, programs, and/or procedural changes needed.

Conditions and Issues

Documenting the existing jail's capacity shortfalls and problems with the physical plant can be a complicated process. The following sources of information are useful:

- **Jail inspection reports.** If issues are well documented in jail inspection reports, planners can chart the inspectors' areas of concern. It is important to look back far enough to show patterns and determine how long the problems have existed.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

Actually showing jail conditions can have more impact than describing them. Digital photography and video can be used to create "video tours" for presentations. Some jurisdictions have placed "virtual tours" on their Web site. Speeding up a time-lapse video of a congested area (e.g., a sallyport) can show traffic problems without jeopardizing privacy or security.

- **Legal documents.** If issues have led to litigation and/or a consent judgment, the related documents will be informative.

- **Facilities department records.** Records from the facilities department can show the impact of a problem on costs and other aspects of jail operations. Planners may also want to obtain an engineer's review of the current facilities. Showing cost impacts is always a good idea, but planners must be prepared to explain why the proposed change is more cost effective than just continuing to "fix" things.

- **Records on boarding inmates.** If crowding is part of the problem, planners should obtain financial information on the costs of boarding inmates (including transportation costs). Approaching this task as a market analysis—i.e., determining for how long reasonably convenient boarding beds will be available to the jurisdiction at a price it is willing to pay—may be helpful.

Long-Term Implications

Planners need to determine the long-term implications of the physical plant issues and the various trends identified in the information-gathering process. This task commonly involves developing jail population forecasts. Planners need to ask:

- What will the jail population be in the future if the local criminal justice system continues its current policies and practices? What will it be if the policies and practices change?

- How far into the future can we realistically plan?

- How long can we realistically expect the new facility, as built, to meet the community's needs?

At this point in the process, planners typically can estimate how big the facility should be and how long it should last. They can answer the first big project question: How much capacity is needed? That relates to the second big question: How much will it cost?

Using Findings From the Needs Assessment

The information gathered during the needs assessment constitutes the basic elements. More detailed information will be developed as potential solutions are explored. Typically, this more detailed information goes first to a key group of policymakers—the core group appointed earlier. At this stage of the support-building process, a critical task for the core group is to determine how to take this information to the wider community. **This is the second opportunity to build support for the project.** Planners should go back to the list of potential supporters generated earlier and invite those whose participation is needed in this phase of the process.

At this point, planners need to be aware of a myth about jail projects: that a project has just one "public information campaign" and that planners must wait until they have all of the answers before taking the project to the public. More often, the campaign has two phases. The first focuses on identifying problems and documenting needs, the second on examining options. Although, as mentioned earlier, it is a mistake to respond to questions prematurely, it is also counterproductive to wait too long to bring the public into the process.

> ## Going Public With the Information
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> - **Use the personal touch.** Plan campaign events as you would plan a party. Send invitations. Call people and invite them personally. A small notice in the newspaper is not enough. The campaign will need telephone and clerical support to ensure that the people who should be involved in the project are there, at the table, when they are needed.
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> - **Speak carefully.** People will remember the first things you say about the project for a long time. Speakers should not say more than they know, and they should be willing to simply say "I don't know" if that is the case. They should avoid using "jail jargon."

Part 1: Share the Problems and Findings

When the needs assessment has been completed, planners will have a great deal of information and a good idea of what should be done to address the problem. They must, however, continue to resist the temptation to leap into the solution. Starting the campaign with the solution may make people feel that they have not had an opportunity for input, and this can backfire later in the project.

Regardless of the tactics chosen for taking project information to the public, the information must move beyond the core group at this point. How planners approach this task is critical and can shape the kind of support the project receives.

The focus at this stage is:

- What is the problem with the existing jail?

- Why should people care about this problem?

- What is known about the current situation?

- What is needed?

- What options are available for addressing the problem?

It is important during this stage to develop a statement of the *problem,* not the *solution*. The overall strategy should be a blend of information, education, involvement, and participation. As planners take the information to the public, they should ask people for their thoughts, input, and questions. Planners are not asking people for the solution. Rather, they want to encourage discussion and find out what people need to know to support the project. For example, planners might ask:

- What is your reaction to what we've presented about the situation?

- What responsibility does the jail have to the community—and the community to the jail?

- What does the community want to achieve by incarcerating people?

- What approaches should we consider to address the problems we've described?

- What criteria should we use in evaluating the options?

This phase will probably generate a list of questions that planners cannot yet answer. The list, which will help to focus the next stage of work and the support-building campaign, is likely to include the big project questions:

- What will it cost to build the jail?

- What will it cost to operate it?

- What will it look like?

- Where will it be located?

- Which option is the "best fit" for the community?

Planners must not "shoot from the hip" to answer these questions. They should explain that they will find answers and create opportunities for sharing them with the public. Regardless of what planners think about the options suggested by the public, they should list all of them and develop evaluations that address them. Presenting responses to these questions at a

later date can be another opportunity to bring people into the process. A number of new potential supporters may emerge during this stage, and planners should consider inviting them to become more involved by joining the planning team, attending planning work sessions, or following the project's progress via a newsletter, a Web site, or another medium. (A sign-in sheet should be used at all gatherings to get names, addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses for a mailing list.)

Part 2: Look for the Solution

Moving from the needs assessment phase to a specific plan for meeting those needs requires bringing three elements into balance: (1) what the facts say should be done, (2) what people's values make them want to do, and (3) what the available resources say can be done. It means dealing with economic feasibility and a detailed cost/benefit analysis of each option. It requires developing a prearchitectural program for physical plant solutions and analyzing the operating costs associated with each option. The costs of alternatives to jail confinement need to be part of the equation. Several repetitions of this cycle may be necessary to achieve an appropriate balance.

Framing the options effectively is important. "Doing nothing"

should be included as an option, to demonstrate what will happen if the problem is ignored. It is useful to develop general options that can apply to more than one suggestion (e.g., "expand capacity by renovating an existing building" can apply to various locations). Now is the time to evaluate the laundry list of suggestions from the public.

At this point in the process, the core group is one of the greatest resources. The group can help planners anticipate questions and issues as they prepare for the next public event, where they will present their initial evaluations and encourage further discussion of the options. Planners will need to develop the quantitative, cost/benefit portion of each option before the event. Members of the public who participate in the event can be asked what they see as the strengths and weaknesses of each option, so their views can be incorporated into the final recommendation for a preferred option.

If the forum used in Part 1 worked well, it can be used again for this event. If not, alternatives should be considered. Media strategies should be in place at this point. Planners should talk to the editorial board of the local newspaper, as well as the reporter who usually covers county government. Now is the time to strengthen or repair

relationships with the media, because the project will need their help later. Now is also the time to review the list of potential supporters and opponents created earlier and re-extend the invitation to become involved.

In most jurisdictions, the decision to adopt a particular solution ultimately falls to the elected officials. The work of the core group—to which the public has had access and input—leads to a recommendation. The mechanism for making the recommendation varies:

- It may come from the core group, county administration, or a consultant.

- It may be in the form of a motion by a member of the county commission or other body of elected officials.

- It may be in the form of a recommendation from a subcommittee (in jurisdictions with a larger group of elected officials).

Articulating and Refining the Message

A "case for support," mentioned in the title of this section, is a concept borrowed from the world of nonprofit organizations, which rely on individual, corporate, and foundation funding for much of their revenue. In that context, a

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Elements of a Case for Support

- **Mission.** Why the community has a jail and how the current facility contributes to the mission. (The current jail may actually be a barrier.)

- **Impact on the environment.** The big picture. How does the current facility influence the community and other elements of the justice system?

- **Problem statement.** What has to change. The problem statement should include both logical components and emotional or value-based components. Different audiences will gravitate to different components.

- **Options and answers.** What options have been considered and what has been identified as the best solution for the community.

- **How you can help.** How citizens can help with this problem.

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case for support is a document that explains why people should contribute their resources to the organization, allowing it to carry out its mission. In the context of local government, a case for support may not be a written document, but it has a similar intent. When planners build a case for support for new jail construction, they are asking the public to allow tax dollars to be applied to help carry out a specific mission, and sometimes they are asking the public to show that support by voting on an initiative.

All of the elements of a case for support have been developed during the planning process, which typically takes months or even years. A great deal of information has been assembled and much

group work has been done. Planners have held public meetings and made presentations. All of this is the groundwork for what comes next: reducing this information to its essence and shaping the message to be taken to the broader community. For the rest of the support-building campaign, the message is the focus. A variety of tactics will be used to get the message out, and all details of the project must be kept current and available for use as questions arise.

Developing Campaign Strategies

Information-gathering and other activities up to this point create a kind of infrastructure for the

support-building campaign to come—a two-way pipeline that takes information from the core group to the wider community and then brings the community's reactions and input back to the core group. Planners now need to use that infrastructure to build broader support within the community.

Jail projects usually need more than one support-building strategy. One approach to choosing strategies is to identify potential target groups and then match strategies to the project's likely impact on each target group and to the level and kind of support needed from each group.

Identifying Target Groups: Whose Support Is Needed?

The many groups and individuals whose support is required over the life of the project are known as "stakeholders." If project planning has been under way for a while, the list of stakeholders is probably quite long.

Planners should guard against the tendency to lump together a number of stakeholders into a single group, "the public." The public is far from unified. Furthermore, not identifying *specific* stakeholders can cause planners to overlook influential groups, including ones that could stop or significantly delay the project. Again, the core

group can help identify people whose support the project needs.

Although planners may not yet be able to identify every group whose support they will need, now is the time to start thinking about details. (For example, "groups that represent particular segments of the community" might include the Chamber of Commerce, labor organizations, senior citizens' groups, social activists, and church groups.) Identifying potential opponents within these target groups is essential; ignoring potential opponents can place the project in great peril, as a number of jurisdictions have learned the hard way.

Matching Strategy to the Level of Impact

A jail construction project's impact on a particular target group may be high, moderate, minimal, or none at all. The level of impact is an important factor in choosing strategies for building support. Planners should consider the potential impact of the project on:

- The immediate neighborhood.
- People who work in the facility.
- People who work in other justice system agencies.
- The jurisdiction in which the facility will be located, especially if this is changing.

Potential Stakeholders

- Groups in local government.
- Groups in the justice system.
- Regulators (of any aspect of the project).
- Agencies that serve the jail's clientele.
- Agencies that use the jail's services.
- "Movers and shakers" in the community.
- Voter groups.
- Groups that represent particular segments of the community.
- Groups with a potential affinity for the jail's mission.
- Groups (organized or not) that could block the project.
- Neighbors.

This list is not exhaustive; planners need to identify the stakeholders in their own community.

- Taxpayers, especially those who may be disproportionately affected.

In assessing potential impact, planners need to be aware of the target group's *perception* of the impact. Planners' familiarity with jails can get in the way of

Case Study: When Impact Assessments Go Right…and Wrong

The location selected by County A for its new jail facility was more than a mile from the nearest community, except for one large luxury home right next door. Planners ran into problems because they miscalculated the project's impact.

The project team correctly identified the potential impact on the neighbor. Elected officials met with the neighbor, using a strategy that asked for the neighbor's input and participation in areas of concern. They illustrated how the project could actually help the neighbor and then made those things happen. As a result, the neighbor became a strong supporter of the project.

On the other hand, planners initially thought the project would not have much impact on the community—the jail would be barely visible from the nearest homes. But community residents, who received only general information about the project, reacted based on how they *perceived* the jail would affect them, responding from an emotional perspective rather than a factual one. Worried about property values, the safety of children walking to school, and the presence of released inmates in the community, residents organized and then began a campaign to stop the project. The situation became a major local news story.

The project team quickly increased opportunities for community input—"listening meetings" for residents, and meetings with organized neighborhood groups, the local press, and the city council. The project team encouraged residents to e-mail their questions and concerns and then responded to every concern voiced. Resistance to the project decreased, and the "stop the project" campaign ended. One year after the new jail opened, the local paper ran a full-page story under the headline "County A Kept Its Promise."

accurately assessing how others might react to the project. Therefore, it may make sense to simply ask people if and how they think the project will affect them.

The rule of thumb for matching support-building strategy to level of impact is: The greater the potential impact of the project on a target group, the more the strategy should emphasize the active involvement of target group members. When in doubt, assume a higher level of impact.

Matching Strategy to the Level of Support Needed

The greater the level of support needed from a specific target group, the more planners will need to use strategies that emphasize the active involvement of potential supporters. At the very least, these potential supporters will need:

- Information to help them make informed decisions.

- An opportunity to express their concerns.

- Assurance that their concerns have been considered by project decisionmakers.

- Access to a forum in which they can participate if they wish.

Matching Strategy to the Kind of Support Needed

Jail construction projects need many different kinds of support. One more way to choose a support-building strategy is to think about the kind of support needed. Planners should consider the following questions:
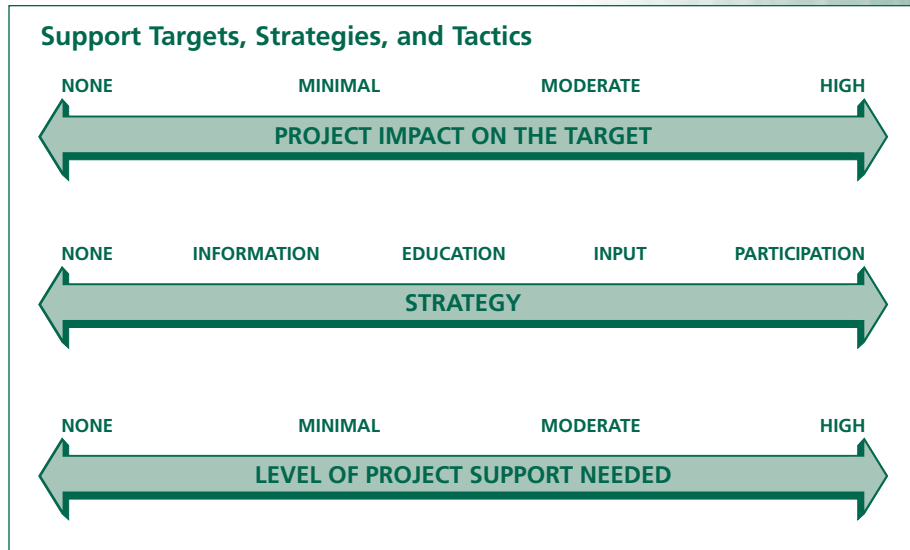
- Do we need this group to take an action? How much effort will be required? *Example:* We need the public to vote to support this project.

- Do we need this group to approve all or a portion of the

project? *Example:* We need the jail inspection agency to approve a request for a variance.

- Will the needed action cost this group something, either financially or nonfinancially? How high is that cost? *Example:* We need the city council to change a practice so that it would allow the jail to connect to a water treatment plant.

- Do we need this group to refrain from acting? *Example:* We need the church across the street from the preferred site not to seek an injunction stopping acquisition of the property.

- Is the nature of support political? Financial? An approval? Moral? Spiritual?

In the "County C" case study, the jail project team clearly needed political support from the commissioners. They also needed support from "the public"—just not the kind of support they thought they would need. Sometimes public support is more than a willingness to vote for the project. It can include verbal and written support from key constituencies and something that seems very much like "moral support" for the project.

County C's experience also illustrates how strategies that work when planners need the most direct action and the highest level of support can be equally effective

Support Targets, Strategies, and Tactics

NONE	MINIMAL	MODERATE	HIGH
	PROJECT IMPACT ON THE TARGET		

NONE	INFORMATION	EDUCATION	INPUT	PARTICIPATION
		STRATEGY		

NONE	MINIMAL	MODERATE	HIGH
	LEVEL OF PROJECT SUPPORT NEEDED		

Case Study: A Multilevel Strategy for a Complex Situation

Geographically large and sparsely populated, County B needed a new jail. The jail would be funded by a special sales tax, to be approved in a countywide referendum. Each city council in the county had to pass a resolution to put the tax initiative on the county ballot. The jail project team planned a two-phase support-building campaign to convince first the city officials and then the voters.

County B's large city, the county seat, had a somewhat contentious relationship with the smaller cities, which included many agricultural communities and a "free-thinking" resort town. Nevertheless, the county had a history of successful capital project initiatives built on negotiation. For the jail project, that meant offering the cities incentives in the form of local projects to be included on the countywide ballot; the local projects had to be relatively small, though, to balance the cost of the jail.

The jail project team put together an education program, presenting their case for support to all of the city councils and to organized groups in each city. Meanwhile, the county commissioners negotiated with the mayors to define the local projects to be included on the referendum. After much negotiation, the municipalities approved the initiative.

Then the project team created an easy-to-use presentation and took it anywhere they could—senior centers, church groups, the county fair—more than 100 presentations in all. The capital projects tax passed with 63 percent of the vote.

Case Study: A Cautious Approach to an Unusual Situation

County C had no jail—only a small holding facility. Its arrangement of boarding inmates in three other jurisdictions had worked fairly well, but costs were rising, the jail that held most of the inmates was becoming crowded, and a new court order meant the county had to start a shuttle service for work-release inmates.

County C had the capacity and authority to issue a jail construction bond without asking voters for approval. The three county commissioners agreed that building a jail made sense, but they were concerned about the political consequences of either proceeding without a referendum or holding a referendum, being turned down by the voters, and then having to build the jail anyway.

The commissioners chose to undertake an extensive public education campaign before deciding whether to put the issue up for a vote. They held several large public meetings, asking all participants how they thought the county should proceed. Participants were concerned about the potential cost of the project, but they were more concerned about the costs of failing to address the issue. At one of the meetings, a resident said that the commissioners were elected to make these hard decisions and, if the facts were as clear as presented, they had little choice. "Why put it on the ballot if you know you have to do it anyway?" Ultimately, the commissioners came to the same conclusion. All of the commissioners were re-elected.

when the situation calls for less direct action. County C opted for the highest level of education and involvement and obtained support for its project.

This section has discussed strategies local jurisdictions can use to build community support for jail projects. As noted earlier, whereas strategies are general approaches, tactics are the actions taken to carry out strategies. Tactics should be conscious choices that reflect the environment in which planners are operating.

Tactics

Support-building tactics fall into two categories: (1) information dissemination and (2) input and participation. In reality, however, the same tactic may serve both purposes; the distinction is in the intent. (For example, planners may send out a mailing to inform the public about the options they considered in choosing a site. Their purpose may be to justify the choice or to open a public dialog about it.)

Information Dissemination Tactics

There are many ways for jail projects to get the word out. This section discusses three broad categories—the written word, the spoken word, and images. (Some tactics may combine all three.) The section also notes additional tools (jail tours, radio and television, and Web sites) and highlights some points to keep in mind when developing information dissemination tactics.

The Written Word

All projects use some form of the written word. These forms include project documents, fact sheets, and newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor.

Project documents such as the needs assessment, master plan, or feasibility study are the source of choice for people who want to know the details of the project. Make sure the documents are attractive and readable. If they are lengthy, provide a summary. These documents are public information, so make it easy for people

to access them (e.g., post the documents on the project Web site in a downloadable format).

Fact sheets provide the essential facts about the project, typically as a bifold or trifold brochure or a single sheet of paper that can be mailed or used as a handout. The fact sheet should summarize information such as jail size, cost, capacity, and key features. Some jurisdictions use a question-and-answer format to present the information.

Newspapers can inform the community about any aspect of the project. Although a full discussion of media relations is beyond the scope of this bulletin, planners should be aware of some basic considerations:

- **Articles.** In many jurisdictions, jail projects have worked with reporters who routinely cover the police or courthouse beat to do stories about the jail. These stories can be an excellent way of describing the problem, the consequences of inaction, and the options. Planners should try to get reporters interested in writing about the jail *before* the time for key decisions arrives. They should remember that controversy means more coverage, but it also shifts the coverage away from the facts: Ideally, articles focus on the project, not the people involved.

Case Study: Preparing To Meet the Editorial Board

County D's relationship with the local press was generally good. However, several months before the jail project team's planned meeting with the editorial board of the daily paper, the county had moved its legal notices to a smaller weekly paper as a cost-saving measure. The team, correctly anticipating that the daily paper would not be happy about this, decided to acknowledge the situation in their meeting with the board.

The team also reviewed current themes in the paper's editorials. One theme that emerged was consolidation of government services. In its case for support to the editorial board, the team emphasized aspects of the project that were consistent with this theme.

- **Editorials.** Editorials are especially important if the project will require a vote. The project team should meet with the editorial board to make a case for support. The team should try to anticipate issues the editorial board members may raise and should listen carefully to their views.

- **Letters to the editor.** Most newspapers print letters to the editor on topics of local interest. Government officials may not be in a position to write letters on behalf of the jail project, but private citizens who support the project can do so.

The Spoken Word

The spoken word may be the most powerful form of information dissemination; it can either build support or create obstacles. One underrated but important aspect of building support is the willingness of people who are involved with the project to speak up for it. Project participants can share their knowledge with friends and family and influence them to become advocates for the project.

Project "insiders" must always speak with one voice. This does not mean becoming "yes men" who never challenge options and positions in private. It does mean, however, sticking with a decision once it is made. Nothing is more detrimental to a project (or a bigger story for the press) than division within the ranks.

The spoken word includes both formal presentations and informal conversation. Both are important to the success of the project.

Formal presentations can occur in a variety of settings:

- **Presentations to elected officials.** These usually occur as project milestones are achieved (e.g., completion of the needs

assessment) and may be largely ceremonial. If the project team is working well, there should be no surprises. These presentations are opportunities to bring the project to the attention of the media and of an audience who may be attending the meeting for other purposes.

- **Community meetings.** If a meeting is purely informational, make sure participants leave with a written summary (e.g., the project fact sheet). People often do not remember much of what they hear, and having the facts in writing guards against different versions emerging from the same presentation. Reinforce the spoken word with photographs or other images.

- **Speakers bureaus.** Creating a "speakers bureau"—a group of knowledgeable people who are prepared to speak about the project—is a tried-and-true

way of getting the word out. The project team should actively seek out target groups whose support the project needs and ask if they are looking for luncheon speakers. Speakers must be consistent in their presentations:

- ● **Use a script.** These presentations will be brief, typically 20 minutes or less. Speakers should use an outline. If at all possible, they should incorporate a video or an automated visual presentation (such as PowerPoint) to summarize key points.

- ● **Develop a list of questions and answers.** All presentations are likely to include a question-and-answer period. The project's core group should try to anticipate questions and prepare speakers to answer them. Speakers must also be prepared to say "I'm not sure, but I'll find out and

get back to you" or "We're working on that and we'll have an answer at a later time." Each speaker should contribute to a list of questions asked and answers given, to keep information current and consistent.

Informal conversations can be one of the most effective ways of sharing information about the project. Every community has its places where people congregate for morning coffee or after-work socializing. Keeping in mind the caveats (consistency, etc.) for formal presentations, project insiders should take advantage of these opportunities to talk about the project. This approach, particularly when combined with active listening, can give the project team a good feel for what the community is thinking.

Images

Pictures can be worth a thousand words—if they convey the intended message. They can also combat misinformation about the nature of jails as institutions and as public buildings. **Photographs and videos** are useful for describing problems in the existing jail and showing what the new jail will be like. Digital technology makes it easy to create "before-and-after" images. **Charts and graphs** make statistical information about the project clearer and give it greater impact.

Case Study: Using Video To Contrast the Old and the New

County E's jail was more than 100 years old. The exterior blended with the nearby courthouse and administration building, but inside, the structure had all the problems of a 19th-century building in the 21st century. The project team documented these problems in a digital video, which they shot, edited, and produced themselves. The team used the video in a presentation that began with NIC's "Beyond the Myths" video (see sidebar, page 3), which includes footage of contemporary facilities and provides many images of functional areas. County E's video used images of the same areas in the old jail, creating a clear contrast.

Tours

Although virtual tours are a good way to generate interest in and support for a project, there is nothing like an actual tour of the existing jail. Keep in mind that the tour guide is familiar with the jail but the "guests" are not. The guide needs to point out things and explain why they are important or a problem. Consider using a script with key points to emphasize during tours, and set expectations for "tour guides."

Case Study: Outreach via Public Access Television

County F's public television station was always looking for things to fill air time. The jail project team scripted and filmed four presentations on key project topics. Each segment included information, discussion by team members and interested citizens, and related images. The segments ended with an invitation to call the project's hotline and come to its regularly scheduled public meetings. When the station ran the presentations prior to the meetings, hotline calls increased and "new faces" appeared at the meetings.

Radio and Television

Most media outlets are required to provide some public service programming, and some jurisdictions have access to their own stations. At key points in the campaign, **talk shows** can be a useful way to inform the public. Participants should know topics and questions in advance. They should also consider the show's audience and be prepared for call-in questions. **Round table** discussions are another potentially useful format. These discussions can be either scripted or freeform but always need a focus.

At times, the project may attract **mainstream media** coverage. The project team should have a number of 20-second sound bites prepared for these occasions, which are good opportunities to be "on message" and to interest people in learning more about the project by coming to community meetings, calling a hotline, or visiting a Web site.

Web Sites

Web sites can potentially combine most of the informational media discussed in this section *and* serve as a vehicle for input from the community (e.g., online surveys, question-and-answer pages). However, jail projects need to be aware of two critical aspects of Web sites:

- **Development and maintenance costs.** Good Web sites require considerable effort to develop and maintain. Information must be updated regularly. If a project lasts several years, this can involve considerable investment of time and effort.

- **Getting people to use the site.** Web sites are generally passive; they do not seek their own audiences. The team will need a strategy for sending people to the site.

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Case Study: Promoting the Project Web Site

To get people to check its Web site more regularly, County G's jail project team added a live-time daily feature that showed how many inmates were boarded out and the costs to date, and a photo/video series that typically showed time-lapse images of key areas of the jail (e.g., the vehicle sallyport). The team also found a sponsor to purchase pens, pencils, and inexpensive computer gear with the project's Web address. These items were distributed at every presentation. The Web site was also featured on the title page of all project documents.

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Points To Keep in Mind

Jail project teams should keep several things in mind as they choose and implement information dissemination tactics, especially when ballot initiatives are involved.

- **The overall campaign.** Most projects use many different methods to get the word out. Information dissemination tactics should be part of an overall campaign that is timed to the project's schedule and key events.

- **Project cycles.** Projects have natural cycles. Periods of quiet work and preparation alternate with periods of intense public activity, but planners always need to keep the project in the public eye.

- **Timing.** The project team should carefully consider the timing of announcements and presentations. (Timing is also an issue in scheduling the ballot initiative itself. Should it be part of an off-year election? Should it be a special election? What other initiatives are likely to be on the ballot? Who is likely to vote in the election being considered?)

- **Signs and slogans.** These should reflect the project's message and be readily identifiable. The language should be clear (ballot language often is not).

- **Opinion pieces.** Elected officials and citizen organizations (e.g., League of Women Voters) usually put out pro-and-con mailings on each initiative in an election. This is also an opportunity for the jail project team to state its case.

- **Legal issues.** In many states, it is illegal for a local government to advocate for a ballot initiative. Governments usually can provide information, but not money, for advertising, signs, etc. The project team should know the rules in its jurisdiction.

- **The target audience.** The project team should match each information dissemination tactic to the intended audience. This requires an awareness of the kinds of things the community responds to.

Input and Participation Tactics

Any of the information dissemination tactics in the previous section can become a means for input and participation, if the audience is encouraged to become actively involved in the exchange of information. The project team should be aware of opportunities for input and participation in two contexts: (1) the organized groups that are directly involved in the project and (2) the general public.

Organized Groups

Jurisdictions often establish a **planning group** during both the master planning and prearchitectural programming phases of a jail project. An earlier section discussed the role of the project's core group—people who have a high stake in the outcome of the project and were involved in getting it started. However, planners should also seek input from jail staff (e.g., the person currently responsible for booking can help plan how that function will work in the new jail). In addition to contributing valuable information

to the planning process, these individuals can advocate for the project with their peers.

An earlier section discussed the potential use of **advisory groups** as a means of involving a broader spectrum of the community in the jail project. These groups, with their outsider's perspective (i.e., outside the criminal justice system), can also provide a "sense" test for the project team: if the project makes sense to them, it is likely to make sense to the community members they represent. Advisory groups can also add legitimacy to the project and may actually become part of the team that takes the project to the public.

The General Public

Jail projects can use a number of different approaches to encouraging the active involvement of community members:

- **Public hearings.** All local governments are familiar with these highly structured events. A chairperson runs the meeting, attendees must register to speak, speaking times are limited, and there is no opportunity for dialog (the convening group takes comments under advisement and acts at a later date).

- **Listening meetings.** At these meetings, the convening officials simply listen to citizens. Less formal than a public

hearing, a listening meeting is particularly useful in helping officials learn what the public sees as the issues in a controversy.

- **Surveys.** These may be traditional public opinion surveys in which the jurisdiction polls a scientific sample of citizens to determine their opinions or the extent of support for an initiative. Less formal surveys can also be useful.

- **Focus groups.** Focus groups are smaller meetings in which participants interact with a facilitator and each other. Participants may be selected randomly or from specific subgroups of

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Case Study: Surveys as Two-Way Information Pipelines

The project team in County H thought that residents needed a better understanding of what the jail does. The team assembled a public safety "test," which included questions about the jail (including how it differs from a prison). The test was distributed to as many groups as possible (including shoppers at the local mall), along with answers that provided critical information about the jail. This process also gave team members opportunities to discuss the community's jail problem.

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the community. These sessions provide more of an opportunity for dialog and can give the project team a deeper understanding of public perceptions on a particular topic. A record of the discussion is kept for reference purposes.

- **Community meetings.** Also known as public forums, these gatherings are likely to involve larger numbers of people. Traditionally, they have been used to disseminate information; with a little effort, they can become a vehicle for input and participation. This usually requires more than simply asking for questions at the end of a presentation. One approach is to use structured small-group discussions with a "report out" from a group representative. These discussions focus on a specific task, such as responding to questions relevant to the current stage of the project. In addition to announcing meetings in the local paper and other outlets, the project team should keep lists of attendees and personally invite them to future meetings.

- **Neighborhood or special group meetings.** The project team should actively seek out two kinds of groups: (1) those most affected by the project and (2) those whose support is essential. The team should be

Case Study: Making the Most of a Community Meeting

At its community meeting, the County I jail project seated participants at round tables for eight, with an advisory group member at each table. After the formal presentation, each table developed criteria for evaluating options to address the jail problem. These criteria were eventually grouped into the evaluation tool used by the project team.

proactive, taking the project to the group rather than waiting for the group to make the first move. Team members should attend regularly scheduled meetings of any group in these two categories.

Putting It Together: One Community's Experience

One community's experience with building support for a jail project illustrates how the elements discussed in this bulletin can work together in a winning strategy. It also illustrates how small things can influence outcomes and how projects can learn from failures.

The Initial Campaign

County X knew it had a problem with its 100-year-old, 120-bed jail, which was crowded, inefficient to operate, and becoming difficult to maintain. The sheriff, county board, and county administrator agreed that a "quick fix" would not work this time. (Just 5 years earlier, the county had converted a former warehouse into an 80-bed minimum-security facility, solving its bedspace problem at a reasonable cost. But the jail population increased again, and now the county was boarding inmates in other jails.) The county hired an architect and a consultant to help plan a new jail.

Believing that the best approach would be to develop a good solution and then educate the public about it prior to the required referendum, the county worked with the consultants to complete a population forecast, a prearchitectural program, and a schematic design for a 6-story, 600-bed jail on the same site as the current jail. The county established a $50 million budget for the project and developed a presentation that highlighted the problem, the rationale for the solution, and what the new facility would look like. The sheriff and other county representatives, along with the architect, made more than 200 presentations to community groups in a public education campaign.

The Obstacle

Officials believed they had made the best choice and had put together a strong case for support. However, one segment of the community strongly disagreed and was highly motivated to do something about it.

As the shape of the new jail facility emerged, a group of homeowners who lived on the bluff above the jail became concerned that the new structure would block their view of the river. This neighborhood group attended public presentations and spoke out about issues that resonated with the rest of the community. (One opponent later said the group purposely used the cost issue to defeat the project rather than relying on the more parochial issue of the facility's height.) The group found financial supporters and placed prominent "NO" signs in yards.

The county tried various strategies to counter the neighborhood group's influence, but it lost the referendum by more than 10 percentage points. Unfortunately, the jail problem remained.

Learning From Experience

County X policymakers decided to ask residents why they had not supported the referendum. With the help of a professional planning consultant, the county held a

community summit at which all residents—not just the most vocal—had input.

Several issues emerged:

- The project was seen as too expensive and too large.

- No other options (e.g., alternatives to incarceration, increased efficiency in the justice system) had been considered.

- Community members had not been invited to participate in the process.

After the summit, the county established a strategically named advisory group—the Community Jail and Alternatives Advisory Committee (CJAAC)—consisting of representatives from the criminal justice system and the community (including residents who had opposed the project). CJAAC worked with system efficiencies for about a year and concluded that the county still had a facility problem. It made two recommendations that shaped the course of the project:

- The consultant would work with CJAAC in an open, public process.

- The consultant would address system issues and alternatives before moving toward a facility solution (i.e., building a new jail).

Responding to Public Input

The input: At County X's community summits, one participant asked why the county hadn't considered renovating an abandoned hotel to house inmates, and another asked about joining with surrounding counties to develop a new jail facility.

The response: In developing its facility options, the county worked out the extra staffing costs that would be involved in adding the hotel facility, and the consultant did a "market analysis" that addressed the potential of regionalization. This information was presented at the next community summit.

Starting Over

The first support-building campaign had focused on public education. The second focused instead on public involvement in the planning process (and therefore lasted about three times as long). The county and CJAAC were determined to address all of the issues identified at the summit and to listen carefully for new issues that emerged during the public planning process. As a result, the second support-building campaign ran parallel to the planning process.

Planning

County X completed a **needs assessment** that focused on describing the problem and examining how the justice system functioned. Working with the consultant, CJAAC identified two project tracks:

- **The program track.** New program approaches to manage the jail population and reduce recidivism (substance abuse and mental health interventions, a program for sentenced misdemeanor offenders, and enhanced educational/vocational services for jail inmates) were identified and tested. As a result, potential providers became involved in the process and began to speak for it in the community. The project was now seen as more than "just a jail."

- **The facility track.** Once the new programs were developed, CJAAC determined that the county needed 375 jail beds, rather than the 600 initially proposed. It identified four options: continuing to board prisoners in other locations, adding a third facility, expanding/renovating one of the existing facilities, and replacing one of the facilities.

Building Support

County X, recognizing that it still needed a high level of public support, chose a strategy that included education but *focused* on participation and involvement. To implement its strategy, the county used many of the tactics described in this bulletin.

During the **needs assessment,** CJAAC hosted a second community summit. This summit used structured groups (participants seated at round tables with a CJAAC facilitator) to engage participants in defining the jail's mission statement and choosing criteria for evaluating options.

In the **program track** phase, CJAAC expanded the project's support infrastructure by creating stakeholder groups for each of the four programmatic interventions being developed. These groups, which included community members, service providers, and criminal justice officials, developed recommendations for the county's Board of Supervisors. During this phase, more than 60 community members became involved in the planning process.

During the **facility track** phase, issues raised during the two community summits shaped the options developed by planners, who then presented the options at a third community summit. Small groups seated at tables with CJAAC representatives discussed the options and, using the criteria developed at the second summit, selected the top two. In an open-mike forum, a facilitator gathered information from the groups and created a prioritized ranking. Participants then completed a "straw vote" (the ballot had space for comments/questions), and the results were tabulated and shared. (Interestingly, three of the options were very close in lifecycle cost, and all made some use of existing facilities.)

The Final Campaign

Once recommendations had been submitted to the County Board of Supervisors, CJAAC started the final phase of the support-building campaign. Although the public had been involved throughout the process, success at the polls required a broader approach.

Again, County X used many of the tactics described in this bulletin. The Sheriff's Office hosted more than 100 jail tours. The project's speakers bureau used summit materials in presentations to community groups. Efforts to address concerns raised by the editorial board of the local paper resulted in the paper's endorsement of the project.

Political Developments

As an alternative to achieving the required 60-percent vote in another referendum for the jail facility, County X explored the idea of developing a joint-use facility with another governmental entity. Such a facility could be approved by a simple majority (more than 50 percent). There were obstacles to overcome:

- The state legislature had to pass a minor legislative change.

- County X had a problematic relationship with the likely partner, City Y.

- City Y was planning a new police facility—a good candidate for joint use. But that project was moving forward rapidly.

County X worked with local representatives and other counties to get the needed legislative change. City Y elected a new mayor and city council, providing an opportunity for County X to explore shared interests. The county and city determined that both would benefit from consolidating some of the jail and police functions (e.g., communications, evidence and property management, parking). They decided to connect the two facilities, while maintaining enough separation to allow each project to move forward on its own timetable.

The Outcome

The ballot initiative for the new jail passed by a 58-percent margin. Clearly, the political developments increased the odds of success: Without the joint-facility approach, County X could have done everything right in its support-building efforts and still failed. But without CJAAC's 3-year public planning effort, would the city and county have been able to collaborate on what could have been viewed as an unpopular project?

Conclusion

For a jail project to succeed, project officials cannot depend on others to carry the ball. Consultants and staff can help develop the information and structure the process, but success requires the personal involvement, commitment, and leadership of those in charge.

In defining what they can do to increase the potential for success, project leaders should ask themselves:

- Am I willing to be associated with this project?
- Will I advocate for an "unpopular" cause?
- Will I work to transform that cause into something the community understands and can support?

If the answer to all of these questions is yes, now is the time to begin working with others on the project team to build a strong case for support and a consistent message. Rather than waiting until every question is answered and a solution is selected, the team should start right away to build the support the project needs to transform it from plan to reality.

About the Author

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