

Ensuring a Good Policy Decision

Research Case Study Insights

The WaterReuse Foundation (WRF) Report, “Best Practices for Developing Indirect Potable Reuse Projects,” established 25 best practices for managing indirect potable reuse, or water supply replenishment. In the report, these best practices were used as a context for evaluating past and ongoing projects, and highlighting the relationships between utility behavior, public perceptions, and outcomes. In these website case study summaries, we focus on water reliability, water quality confidence, conflict management, and the policy decision. We do this to emphasize the issues that are arguably the most significant in determining outcomes. Looking at case studies from this perspective improves our clarity and understanding, but is not a substitute for reading the best practices and the detailed case study analyses in the WRF Report.

The insights and advice in this summary were not available when the case study projects were planned and proposed. They are not a measure of the professionalism or integrity of utility personnel and their consultants. Proposing Water Supply Replenishment typically requires that the utility significantly improve its ability to understand public perceptions, communicate about value and investment, and manage relationships. Those interviewed about the case study projects were very open and forthcoming about problems, project weaknesses, and successes.

The “Ensuring a Good Policy Decision” trust-building objective addresses the fact that the decision to implement water supply replenishment will likely fall to some form of representative government. This is why the utility must make sure that its communications efforts are focused on *meeting the needs* of policy decision makers, and giving them the cover and confidence to make a decision that results in the best value for the community. Ensuring a good policy decision also demands that the utility have meaningful messages of value, and clarity with respect to relationship development priorities. Since the policy decision defines final outcomes, ensuring a good policy decision requires that the utility integrate the practices of the other trust-building objectives related to water reliability, water quality confidence, and conflict management.

Groundwater Replenishment System (GWRS) - Orange County, California - The Groundwater Replenishment System (GWRS) outreach program is a good example of what to do when striving to ensure a good policy decision. The Orange County Water District (OCWD) started very early with its communications (many years before the start of construction) and focused on key members of the community. They were able to develop a growing list of *written supporters* for the project, which makes policy makers much more comfortable. They demonstrated an ability to win over skeptics with their strong messages, belief in the project, and their exceptional track record of water quality management. This ability to manage conflict is very important for making policy makers feel safe to support any form of potable reuse. OCWD also has a strong and ongoing relationship with the media, providing them with information and material for stories.

Another important factor in managing the policy decision is the need for constant communications. OCWD communicates regularly with key constituents. They publish a district newsletter and they have created a “Fast Fax” list of over 250 people that they use for reaching key people quickly. This list is critical when they need a quick response to negative press. OCWD constantly conducts VIP tours and water classes and has not had a major hiatus in communications since the project started. OCWD started to build their contact list in 1998, and it has grown to over 5,000 contacts. Any time they have an event or get responses from surveys, they add names to the list. They also update the database when elected officials change.

Arguably, GWRS has an important advantage when it comes to ensuring a good policy decision. OCWD has a governing board of directors, and serves many communities in Orange County that have their own city councils or governance. This means that OCWD needs to support their board, and reach out to policy makers in many different communities, which requires more outreach effort. The benefit of this structure is that if you are effectively reaching this longer list of policy makers, it is unlikely that a single politician will have the power to cause the project to be derailed. There are too many other important people involved.

Ensuring a Good Policy Decision

Research Case Study Insights

Water Campus - Scottsdale, Arizona - Key factors in the success of the Scottsdale project did relate to political or policy decisions issues. The Scottsdale water resources manager, who was the project champion, had a strong and positive relationship with the Scottsdale city council. He also created a positive working relationship with the media by traveling to the Water Factory 21 at OCWD with the editor of the local newspaper. These factors, combined with the water quality confidence work, and the value of water in the desert, were important.

Water Re-Purification Project - San Diego, California – In this case the San Diego mayor and city council ultimately decided not to proceed with the water re-purification project. By the time of the vote in 1998, the project had become very political. Environmental justice was a factor. The council member from District 4 felt that his community had been singled out and were being treated like “guinea pigs.” A local state politician, Steven Peace, chose to make the project a campaign issue in 1998. Peace positioned himself as “protecting San Diegans” from a “bad project” that would use San Diegans as “guinea pigs.”

So was the San Diego project just a victim of unlucky political circumstances? Following best practices does not guarantee success; however, the San Diego project had flaws that left it open for political opportunists. It had water quality confidence issues due to the fact that the project champion was the city’s sanitation department. The drought of the early 1990s was in the distant past, and by the time of the vote the San Diego County Water Authority was arguably more interested in the Imperial County Water Transfer, and seawater desalination. A broad base of community support had not been developed, and the local paper was generally antagonistic about the project. Finally, at least some of the city council members did not fully understand the basic merits or value of the project. Political opportunists emerge when there is a political opportunity. In the face of an accepted need for new water supply, water quality confidence, a strong base of support from the community, and a positive relationship with the media, there is little opportunity for using Water Supply Replenishment as a political lever.

Similar to GWRS, the outcomes in San Diego were affected by the governing structure. The decision to implement the re-purification project fell to the city council, so the decision making power was concentrated. Smaller governing bodies are more easily polarized, and decisions are more likely to be impacted by past relationship or issues between council members. Given this, we could conclude that the environmental justice issue and other councilperson relationship issues could have been enough to cause the project to be shelved. This is more plausible since the San Diego County Water Authority was not politically invested in the project at the time of the council’s vote.

Clean Water Revival Project - Dublin San Ramon, California - This project addressed the need for increased wastewater disposal capacity due to rapid growth. Pleasanton and Livermore, Dublin’s ocean outfall partners, were not supportive of the original proposal to increase the capacity of the wastewater ocean outfall. The Dublin San Ramon Services District (DSRSD) responded with Clean Water Revival, which proposed piping purified recycled water to groundwater spreading grounds in Livermore, with most of the water eventually going to Pleasanton. This was viewed by opponents as a way to build out Dublin at the expense of the surrounding communities, who felt that rapid growth in Dublin was already decreasing quality of life in their communities. It was also viewed as an environmental justice issue, which is generally a short cut to policy decision problems. There were many conflict and relationship issues that are outlined in the conflict case study insights, and the WRF report.

In summary, The Zone 7 Water District, the pertinent drinking water authority, was initially a supporter. However, a new general manager was hired and Zone 7 pulled their support after a public meeting suggested to them that the project had lost public support. DHS and the South Bay Water Board Continued their support and approved operation of the project. However, the project was ultimately shelved for two reasons. First, Livermore and Pleasanton approved a new wastewater discharge outfall, “removing the need” for the project. Second, Pleasanton, Zone 7 Water District, and a local interest group filed suit to stop operation of the project. From a policy decision perspective, the project needed strong policy maker support from Livermore, Pleasanton and Zone 7.