

Ensuring a Good Policy Decision

White Paper

Introduction

This white paper is one of the tools developed as part of the WaterReuse Foundation project addressing public perceptions of indirect potable reuse. For the project and this paper, indirect potable reuse is defined as replenishing surface waters or groundwater using purified recycled or reclaimed water. This practice will be referred to as “Water Supply Replenishment.”

Defining a Good Policy Decision - The WaterReuse Foundation project’s best practices and tools are focused on ensuring that Water Supply Replenishment gets fair consideration. Water investment decisions are typically made by some form of representative government, so fair consideration will involve policy makers, and ultimately require that a good policy decision is made. It is helpful to start by defining what “a good policy decision” is, and what it is not. A good policy decision is not:

- Necessarily adopting the specific option or method recommended by the utility
- Making decisions based on fear of negative political or personal ramifications, or fear propagated by erroneous technical or scientific information
- Focused on satisfying everyone, which is not possible
- Allowing minority voices to rule *solely* because they are the squeaky wheel

A good policy decision is when policy makers feel unencumbered to base their decision on a sound weighing of benefits, risks, available science and technology, the ethics and competencies of the sponsoring utility, and a balanced assessment of community input. An interesting and important factor is that data collection and analysis are features of risk assessment. The problem is that conclusions based on data and analyses are regularly debated even in the scientific community, and not likely to be understood by decision makers and the general public. This is why other factors such as trust in the utility, compelling benefits, and community relationships are so important to ensuring a good policy decision. When these other factors are not managed well, risk and the uncertainties of science tend to dominate the dialogue. There are no risk-free solutions, and there are no absolute scientific answers.

Ensuring a Good Policy Decision - The advice contained herein addresses the fact that a potable reuse proposal will attract attention and garner more public scrutiny. This will require the utility to be efficient and *at its best* when developing its strategy, messages, and its communication activities. Being at its best means that the utility must:

- Understand and meet the needs of policy makers and address their concerns.
- Develop trust related to investing in water reliability, and addressing water quality concerns.
- Ensure that all communication activities have a purpose that relates to the policy decision.
- Focus outreach activities on developing relationships with the individuals that are likely to influence the policy decision.
- Develop a strong foundation of written support from influential individuals and groups for investing in new water supply, and implementing Water Supply Replenishment.
- Develop a track record of constructively managing disagreement and conflict.

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Key Principles

The Importance of Relationships – It is hard to overstate the importance of relationships in decision making. A trapeze aerialist would be foolish to fly out into space without a trusting relationship with their partner, who they are counting on to make the catch. Similarly, business deals and venture capital decisions are heavily weighted toward relationships and trust. People view trusting relationships as a critical component of managing risk, and protecting themselves from negative events or perceptions.

Relationships have a profound impact on what is considered and what is decided related to a community issue, especially if the issue is viewed as out of the ordinary, or provocative. This is why a purely technical assessment of a problem, and options for solving the problem, do not address all the factors that are important in determining outcomes. This is also why people who are not technical experts can have valuable information and advice related to resolving community water problems. A purely technical approach by a utility will likely be viewed as narrow minded. *Virtually everything that is discussed in this white paper relates to developing strong, positive relationships.*

Given that our objective is to ensure that a good policy decision is made, the most important relationships are between the following entities:

- The utility and policy makers
- The utility and the community
- The policy makers and the community

The Power of Risk Avoidance - The avoidance of risk or negative events plays a powerful role in people's decision making and their need to create trusting relationships. For most people, minimizing or managing risk ranks higher than implementing positive change, or taking entrepreneurial risks. This does not mean that benefits are not considered when making decisions. In fact, risk is almost always viewed within the context of potential benefits. Compelling benefits can encourage an individual to take more risk, such as investing in high yield/high risk stocks, starting a new company, or participating in hang gliding. Some people have a higher tolerance for risk. In the end, people and organizations typically change when the status quo is viewed as unacceptable, or having higher risk than the risk of making a change. Hence a community that is feeling the pain of a severe drought typically will be willing to accept more risk than usual in order to solve the problem.

Despite the fact that compelling benefits color people's view of risk, managing risk and avoiding negative branding will be a powerful motivator for the decision maker, especially when the community is being asked to drink water that has been in the sewer system. The perceived risk of Water Supply Replenishment must be overshadowed by the need to solve an important problem and by a strong and trusting relationship with the utility. Prior to proposing Water Supply Replenishment, the typical utility will not have been required or felt the need to establish this level of trust with its community.

Risk avoidance also impacts the behavior of the utility. Many utilities view interaction with their public as a high risk behavior. They shy away from disagreement and conflict. Ironically, it is more risky to not reach out, and not pursue a dialogue with people who have different or opposing points of view.

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Branded and Branding - In this white paper, we will use the term “branded” to refer to either positive or negative perceptions that a person might have formulated about Water Supply Replenishment, projects in general, and the utility. Whether utilities like it or not, they are being branded by their audiences. Negative perceptions lead to and are the result of mistrust. Positive perceptions relate to value and build trust. The practice of “branding” is employed by companies and other organizations to promote defined perceptions of value about their products, services, and organizations. As stated above, people will need to trust the utility in order to support appropriate investment, and Water Supply Replenishment. Brands are an important factor in building trust and forming relationships.

Water Industry Structure and Culture

Advocating for Appropriate Investment - One of the primary responsibilities of a water utility is to ensure that their community invests appropriately in water supply reliability and water quality. Appropriate investment incorporates striving to be more efficient, and considers the community’s needs today, and tomorrow. In this role, water agencies or water departments are the primary advocates for investment. They are the experts, and there is no one else. Therefore, utility leaders must be able to create compelling cases for specific investments, and must be trusted to manage implementation. Water Supply Replenishment, conservation, water quality improvement programs, seawater desalination, and securing emergency water rights are all important forms of investment. Utilities openly advocating for investment is a defensible and ethical position. Under-investment is a disservice to the community. Despite this, many utilities are shy about asking the community for money, and allow politicians to take cover under the “keeping rates under control” brand, or allow politicians to brand the utility as inefficient.

The Water Industry is Fragmented - Public and private water utilities are typically going it alone with respect to communicating value to their communities and building a positive reputation or brand. They do not have the resources or the economy of scale inherent in international brands like Sony and Nike. Ironically, utilities can be negatively branded by events in other communities that attract national or regional media attention. This makes it extremely important for the water utility to develop a strong local reputation, or brand, with key stakeholders. In order to do this, they must be *efficient with their communication efforts*, which means being focused on the individuals and groups who will have an impact on policy decisions.

The Policy Decision - For water investment decisions, the governing body may be a city council, water board, or group of water commissioners. There are other forms of representation, and in some cases there are multiple governing bodies. Independent of what we think the general public’s perception is on a given topic, the ultimate decision will be made by a few empowered decision makers. Utility managers must understand the motivations, concerns, and needs of these decision makers in order to manage the policy decision. Following are some general assumptions about policy makers that will help utility leaders understand and meet their needs:

- Decision makers are interested in serving their constituents and are open to creating value and high quality of life for their community.
- Decision makers want to be protected from negative perceptions, or negative branding due to controversial issues including large water rate increases, higher taxes, or perceived threats to public health.
- Decision makers may be positively disposed to attaching themselves to an innovative endeavor to enhance their own brand or legacy.
- Decision makers may want to be re-elected and may be interested in higher office, so the issues above will be considered in the context of their desired political future. This means that they will take these issues very seriously, especially the ones related to protecting their personal brand and managing risk.

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The Utility’s Attitude Toward Decision Makers, Politicians - What utility managers believe about decision makers and elected officials is important because it impacts their behavior and how empowered they feel. In *some* cases utility personnel act as if decision makers are not supposed to protect their own interests, or the specific interests of their constituents. This is often branded as “politics” and viewed with disdain. They also expect the decision maker to make the “right decision” with little or no political cover or protection. This is an unreasonable expectation that contributes to poor relationships between utility leaders and community representatives. What we mean by “cover” or “protection” with respect to investments in water is the following:

- The utility has developed a strong foundation of support in the community for resolving the problem and the proposed solution.
- The utility is trusted to address the risks and manage the investment issues.
- The utility has a track record of effectively managing disagreement and conflict.
- The utility has a good sense of public opinions related to the important issues.

Without this cover, politicians will feel vulnerable, making them more likely to react to a few vocal opponents, even if these opponents represent a minority point of view. This is a common scenario that does not serve the best interests of the entire community. Unfortunately, water utility managers sometimes think of themselves as victims of politicians that have no backbone, when in fact the utility has not provided them with the information and protection to allow them to make the best decision. This mentality can go as far as believing that politicians don’t tell the truth, or are corrupt. This is an *unworkable* position that paralyzes the utility, and in most cases is not true. Providing policy makers with the information and protection to make a good choice is the best course of action.

Structure and Politics of Municipalities and Special Service Districts - Different water agency structures and the associated representation will present different challenges. Municipal water departments face different challenges than special service districts.

One of the challenges facing municipal water departments is focus. Municipalities typically have a variety of responsibilities that may include water and wastewater service and solid waste disposal, to name a few. This range of responsibilities makes it more difficult for the “organization” to appear focused with respect to water and water quality. Community members may wonder if they are being asked to trust the same people to manage both water quality and solid waste disposal. On the other hand, a special service district that deals with water supply only, or manages a groundwater basin, will generally appear more focused and may have an easier time demonstrating organizational values that create trust and confidence.

The focus issue also applies to decision makers. City council members have much more widely ranging responsibilities than members of an agency water board, so it will be harder to get their attention. However, a city council will in many cases have the final say, so if they feel politically covered, the project will likely be approved. A special service district and their board of directors may be serving several cities that have their own city councils, so they arguably do not have the final say. There are cases where water boards have approved projects and then reversed their decision because of public support problems.

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One advantage to having multiple governing bodies and many decision makers is that it is more difficult for decision makers to become united or polarized against an issue because there are so many of them. In other words, power is more diffused. A special service water district may lose the support of several people without jeopardizing the success of the project. A smaller body like a city council is more easily polarized, making it more likely that outcomes will be determined by personal issues, previous conflict between council members, or paying back of political favors.

Following are some general recommendations for dealing with these issues:

Municipalities should.....

- Clearly identify the people and departments within the city that are managing water quality and water reliability. These are the people the community is being asked to trust.
- Understand past relationship problems and reasons why the city council has become polarized, or conflicted, in the past. Assess whether the need for new water supply is strong enough to overcome future disagreement.
- Identify the constituents that each council member is likely to listen to. Prioritize developing relationships with these people.

Special service water agencies should.....

- Emphasize their organizational focus and purpose to help create trust.
- Develop champions within governing bodies. Sometimes water board members are also city council members. These board members can act as champions within their respective cities.
- Make sure all decision makers within the agency's jurisdiction are invited to water agency events. Use tours to start relationships with decision makers.
- Be present at the same events as policy makers. This will make the policy makers more confident that they are covered.
- Provide topics or content to local mayors or other officials for their events, whether a local television show or other community events. Local officials typically need people to speak at or be a part of their events.

Building Trust

Developing *trust in the sponsoring utility*, on several levels, is the key when it comes to meeting the needs of the policy makers. Developing this trust requires that the utility address four important ideas and objectives, including Ensuring a Good Policy Decision. These trust-building objectives are noted below, and are the focus of the tools created for the Water Reuse Foundation project.

- **Investing in Water Reliability** - The utility will need to lead a dialogue that explains the key factors that determine water reliability, the local need to invest in new water supplies, the options for developing new supplies, and the compelling benefits of Water Supply Replenishment. Simply stated, the utility must have something meaningful to say, be willing to listen, and be open to changing course within the bounds of solving the stated problem. The objective is for the community and policy makers to trust that the utility understands the important issues, has an open mind about alternatives, and is committed to investment in solving the local water supply problem.
- **Creating Water Quality Confidence** - The utility will need to create water quality confidence by becoming the source of quality, overcoming a common perception that the quality of the physical source is paramount. The objective is for the community to trust that the utility is capable of managing the real and perceived risks associated with using purified wastewater to replenish the potable water supply.

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- **Tuning Conflict and Opposition into Assets** - Unresolved conflict has been the primary cause for Water Supply Replenishment being discarded even in the face of compelling benefits. The goal of this trust-building objective is for the utility to find and engage opponents early in the dialogue with the community. Gaining their trust can lead to stronger relationships, ardent supporters, and even higher value outcomes.
- **Ensuring a Good Policy Decision** - The decision whether or not to adopt Water Supply Replenishment will typically fall to some form of representative government. Given this, most of the utilities efforts need to be managed with an eye on this issue. The goal of this trust-building objective is for the utility to gain the trust of policy makers by demonstrating that they can manage conflict, and by building a strong foundation of support among influential individuals and interest groups within the community.

The first three objectives significantly contribute to achieving a good policy decision. Following is a brief summary of best practices related to these objectives:

Investing in Water Reliability

- Define the key issues that contribute to a reliable water supply, including yearly supplies, storage, and drought-proof supplies such as recycled water or seawater desalination.
- Be clear on your values and commitments related to water reliability. Define what you mean by “water reliability.” Have a clear value standard that includes some level of drought resiliency and disaster provisions.
- Define in meaningful terms the local investment needs. Propose a solution, but position or brand the utility as committed to solving the problem, not committed to a specific solution.
- Improve the situation. Whether water quality or drought resistance, people are more inclined to invest in improvement. Make sure your solution demonstrates improvement in both water reliability and water quality.
- Treat audiences like investors, not students. Spend sufficient time describing the problem and discussing alternatives for solving the problem. Explain the problems and alternative solutions no matter how far along in the project you are. This sets the context of value.
- Convey all the benefits of Water Supply Replenishment.
- Be willing to listen to your audiences and seriously consider their inputs. They may ask for more value and more investment.

Creating Water Quality Confidence

- Define in simple terms the water quality risks.
- Be clear on your values and commitments related to water quality. Think of yourself (the utility) as the source of water quality, not the physical source, and not driven only to meet regulations. Show how the values and actions of the utility ensure that water quality risks are managed.
- Be committed to improving water quality or ensuring that water quality does not degrade. Use this as standard for addressing emerging contaminants.
- Emphasize multi-step treatment, comprehensive testing, increasing knowledge (monitoring or testing water when not necessarily required to by law), utility and industry track record, and event/disaster response plans.
- Manage emerging contaminants by demonstrating a commitment to increasing knowledge.

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Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

- Embrace disagreement and conflict as a path to stronger relationships and better solutions.
- Design communication efforts to find opponents early in the community dialogue.
- Focus on developing relationships instead of “educating.” Conduct a meaningful, fair, and open dialogue with the community.
- Do not assume conflict will go away by itself. This is easier to do if you view conflict as an opportunity to create stronger community relationships.
- Do not let the seeds of disagreement grow into conflict. Make sure “not in my backyard” issues don’t expand into broader conflict.
- Understand past conflicts within the community and have a plan to resolve these issues. Assume that past racial, economic, or political conflict will be energized by what might be viewed as a controversial proposal.
- Select spokespeople who are utility employees or community proponents. Make sure utility personnel are knowledgeable, comfortable in dealing with people, trained to convey the values of the utility, and capable of handling disagreement.
- Listen to and try to understand the *motivations* of opponents. Continue to ask “why.” Do not just repeat your position. Try to find out where opponents’ *motivations* are different or the same as the proposed solution.
- Be honest and clear about the constraints that the utility faces in terms of meeting the needs of opponents. Sometimes these constraints are not as major as they seem after being discussed. Also, opponents may give their consent if they understand the constraints in more detail.

These are some of the highlights from the other project tools. These tools are important to ensuring a good policy decision and should be implemented in conjunction with the recommendations covered in this white paper. For a condensed version of the issues covered in this paper, refer to the WRF advice checklist covering the policy decision.

Communication Strategies and Tactics

The purpose of the insights and recommendations in this white paper are to help the utility provide the “coverage” necessary for decision makers to support investing in solving the stated water supply problem, and giving Water Supply Replenishment fair consideration. Providing this coverage will require developing relationships with the individuals and groups in the community that will influence decision makers and the policy decision.

The Purpose and Results of Communicating - A good place to start is with the definition of the word “communication” in the dictionary, which is to “make common.” This clearly implies a dialogue, which requires the skills of listening and negotiating, and also implies that some form of relationship has been developed. Communication is not one way, and should not be thought of as “educating.” Many utilities still define their communication efforts as “education and outreach.” This stems from the point of view that public agencies must be unbiased, and are not in the business of selling something. This is misleading. It is impossible to be unbiased, and water utilities *must be advocates for appropriate investment* in water infrastructure, and high quality of life for their communities. Building trust and being advocates are not mutually exclusive.

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Every communication activity should have a defined purpose and desired set of results. Following are some important objectives for communicating and developing the appropriate relationships:

- **Informing (Our Communities/Shareholders)** - Sharing information about a pertinent issue or problem, options for solving the problem, and recommendations. The information should be closely connected to the investment decisions facing the community. Avoid sharing information that is not relevant to investment decisions or building trust in the utility.
- **Listening and Learning** - Listening to the audience’s point of view and interests and determining how they relate to the stated problem, and options for solving the problem. This includes being frank about constraints in meeting their interests, and understanding that data and science are not the only factors important in decision making.
- **Finding and Engaging Opponents** - Finding people with differing points of view or opponents early in a process in order to develop closer, more meaningful relationships.
- **Finding Common Ground** - Using the dialogue and closer relationship to come to an agreement or get consent.

Note that *informing* is only one of the four objectives outlined above, yet it in many cases it dominates utility communication efforts. The insights and recommendations outlined in the following paragraphs refer to these fundamental communication objectives.

Building a Foundation of Support - Developing a foundation of support relates to the fourth objective of finding common ground or agreement. Ensuring a good policy decision will require having a strong foundation of support. Building this foundation is similar to constructing a business deal – building momentum behind a proposed endeavor that is intended to create value. This involves finding early supporters and using their support as a springboard for gaining the support of others. Throughout this process of support building, the utility should be listening, learning, and refining its strategy, messages, and communication techniques.

Asking for Written Support - An important aspect of building a foundation of support is being able to determine when you actually *have* someone’s support. Utility leaders have been known to complain that they had someone’s support, only to have the person’s mind change later. It is unlikely that true support was ever established. This is why asking for written support is an important practice. It forces the potential supporter to carefully consider how well they understand the issues, how much risk being a supporter entails, and maybe most importantly whether or not they trust the utility. If they will not agree to support the proposal in writing, it provides an opportunity for the utility to find out why, and move the relationship to the level necessary to get written support. Simply stated, this follow-up creates important opportunities for the utility to achieve the following:

- Learn more about the motivations of the person or group with whom they are communicating.
- Learn more about how people perceive the proposed investment and the utility.
- Develop a stronger relationship.

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Identifying Early Adopters - Early in the outreach process, audiences may need to have an “early adopter” mentality to agree to written support. This early adopter mentality can come from the personality of individuals, or specific roles or focus of the organization or interest group that makes them predisposed to supporting the proposal. The utility should identify and seek out early adopters. Others may not sign on until they see a significant base of support. Asking prospective supporters who else they would like to see supporting the project before they give written support is an acceptable question that can yield valuable information. Later in the process, individuals or groups will sign on because the proposal already has a broad base of support. At this stage of the process, opponents or non-supporters begin to look and feel like outliers.

Prioritizing Relationships - A utility does not have the resources to reach everyone, so using communication dollars efficiently is an important issue. The utility must develop relationships with the following people and organizations:

- Those who are important in developing a strong foundation of support
- Individuals who will likely influence decision makers, or influence public opinion
- Individuals or groups who are or have been involved in conflict, or likely to energize conflict

Specific priority relationships will be different for each community. In general, the important groups include the following:

- *Elected/City Officials* – These individuals are listened to, represent a large group of people, and may have a political agenda that would encourage them to take a position on a controversial subject. City management, city council members, elected water board officials, county boards, state senate and assembly members, and congressional representatives in the service areas *all* fall into this group. Having a positive and interactive working relationship with these decision makers greatly increases the likelihood of positive outcomes.
- *Active Community Members* – This group includes individuals who are regularly involved in key community issues. These individuals may or may not be elected officials, but may just be members of the community who are active and listened to.
- *Business Leaders* – Business leaders depend on a reliable water supply and are interested in the community’s economic condition and position on growth. In many cases business leaders are also community leaders. Reaching out to the Chamber of Commerce and other business groups is important.
- *Ethnic and Social Group Leaders* – These leaders are important if they represent a larger group. Ethnic, social and environmental justice issues can and have generated conflict surrounding water supply replenishment projects.
- *Environmental Leaders* – Water is an environmental issue and environmental groups are a relevant and important audience. They are also interested in growth.
- *Local Regulators* – This category includes local health department representatives.
- *The Media* – The media may be difficult to collaborate with because they view themselves as independent watchdogs. However, an ongoing positive relationship with the media is very important.
- *Trusted Technical or Medical Community Leaders* – These groups or individuals can be important in developing local water quality standards and developing consensus related to risks and acceptable responses.
- *Groups that are Active and Listened To* – It is important to realize that there are a variety of groups that have a community voice. The Mothers of Tampa Bay might be important in that area, while in another community it may be a grandmother’s group or a group similar to Mothers Against Drunk Driving.
- *Well-Networked People* – Many times community leaders have a strong network within the community. They can be a valuable resource for finding out who to talk to, and who might oppose the utility’s recommendations.

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These individuals and groups will form the foundation of support, or be the nucleus of opposition. An ideal collaborator in a public process is someone who represents a larger portion of the community, thereby providing an opportunity for the dissemination of information. The relationship is even more important if an individual has a strong political agenda that relates to established conflict within the community. The individuals who make up these key audiences will change with time. The communication database and communication efforts must be constantly updated.

Actually Reaching Key Audiences - The most important factor in successfully reaching key audiences is being willing to do whatever it takes to develop the necessary relationships. Utility personnel will have to go where key audiences are, even if it means going to odd places at odd times. This will require that the utility leadership and employees understand the importance of developing these relationships. This is more about *being committed* to developing key relationships, than knowing how to do it. It is easy to give up on developing the difficult relationships.

Sometimes just getting access to an important person is difficult. Discussing water issues is not always first on someone's list of things to do. However, this is not a good excuse for failing to develop a relationship. Utilities may need to hire a consultant in order to get access to a certain person or certain communities. What you are paying for is the relationship that the consultant has with the person or organization. Maintain a database of contacts and keep people updated with meaningful information. Do not flood them with too much information. Share the important and meaningful issues related to the value of the endeavor, appropriate investment, and the commitments of the utility.

Gathering Data on Public Sentiments - If you are in a meeting with a group or individual, it makes sense to document their opinions and motivations. This is a great way to leverage the effort you put into arranging and conducting a meeting. Compiling and summarizing this feedback and sharing it with decision makers will help them feel more confident. The utility can also conduct more formal market research and focus groups if they feel they need to. This should be done with care. Results will depend heavily on how the research is conducted. Answers to general questions are an unreliable indicator of support for a specific investment proposed by a specific utility. This is because value and trust are always related to specific needs, specific products, and specific organizations. When presented with the idea of potable reuse, most people will initially react with disgust or "Yuck." Consumer research that documents this initial reaction *is not an indicator of eventual outcomes* when a trusted utility leads a well-managed dialogue with its community.

The Importance of the Media

The culture in the media has changed significantly over the last 30 years. Most of what is seen or heard in our local television and radio is "infotainment." Radio talk shows constantly report on important issues; however, they exercise little regard for balanced reporting. Many of these radio show personalities readily admit that they are not "news" but a "show." Despite this admission, they are definitely aware that they can have a significant impact on public opinions and community decisions.

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Three simple guidelines to follow in developing relationships with the media are as follows:

- It is difficult to have a collaborative relationship with the media. Their job is to find interesting or inflammatory topics to increase ratings or circulation. They may view collaboration as not being objective and not consistent with their role as independent watchdogs.
- Do not count on balanced reporting, especially if it is an interesting or juicy topic, and especially if there is a news lull. Using treated wastewater as a source for replenishing drinking water supplies is still provocative, and an easy target if the foundation of support is not well developed.
- There is significant turnover in the media. Many reporters are here today and gone tomorrow, and therefore maintaining consistent relationships can be difficult.

Although the job is difficult, it is not acceptable to *give up* on working with the media. Best practices for working with the media include the following:

- Develop an ongoing relationship with the reporters and editors. Do not just approach them when you need them to support you in your current endeavor.
- Make sure the brand or positioning of the project is clear. “Toilet-to-Tap” and other negative ideas fill a gap. Make sure there is no ambiguity in the positive value of your proposal.
- Be open and honest with the media.
- An interesting and fairly positive story angle is, “Others have successfully implemented Water Supply Replenishment, why can’t we do it in our community?” This question makes the subject interesting and not overly focused on risks.
- Understand headlines. Even though the full text of a news story may be balanced and even positive, the headline related to indirect potable reuse may create negative impressions or negative branding of water reuse, or the utility. Consider the headline you would like when developing your messages.
- Develop comprehensive media packets that highlight that you are endeavoring to solve a real community problem. Do not rely solely on news “releases.” Use fact sheets, backgrounders and one-on-one media briefings to get your points across.
- Get media packets out early. Fill the information gap with well thought out positioning of the value of the project.
- Include members of the media in the collaboration sessions with stakeholders.
- Make sure the interaction with the media is constant. This addresses the high turnover rate in media personnel and on-air talent.
- Ask known supporters of the project to attend media events.

Turning Conflict and Opposition Into Assets

Conflict management deserves more attention in this white paper because conflict is what causes policy makers to shy away from supporting Water Supply Replenishment. The simple truth is that an individual opponent is much more likely to impact outcomes than an individual supporter. Because of this, the utility’s attitude toward conflict is very important. They must fully understand the risks associated with disagreement and conflict, and its positive aspects. One of the problems that water utilities have is that people have busy lives and getting them interested in water issues can be difficult. By definition, an opponent is interested, which creates *an opportunity* for the utility to develop a deeper relationship, and possibly gain a strong supporter. This is exactly why the utility should use general communications (radio, TV, newspaper, public meetings) to find opponents. Finding opponents early in the community dialogue is important because you want to find them before major project capital is committed.

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So once they find it, how should the utility respond to conflict? The answer is to prioritize developing relationships with opponents. More detailed advice on this topic is included in the other WaterReuse Foundation project tools covering conflict management. There are also specific tools related to identifying past community conflicts, who was involved, and assessing their potential impact on current decisions about Water Supply Replenishment. The work product is always a list of people to reach out to and develop relationships with.

Why is this important to the policy decision? Policy makers will need to be confident that the utility is capable of managing disagreement and conflict. Without this they will feel vulnerable, and will be less willing to support anything more than minimal investment, and less likely to support a project that is viewed as provocative.

It is important to remember that disagreement and conflict *are* opportunities. The utility should not be apprehensive about having a meaningful dialogue with opponents. Not having this dialogue, and not building the appropriate relationships, increases the risk of negative outcomes and damaged reputations.

Summary

It is probably appropriate to conclude by talking about Toilet-to-Tap. As many in the water industry know, “Toilet-to-Tap” is an idea, a funny phrase, and a negative brand that has been blamed for specific Water Supply Replenishment projects being rejected. Arguably, the phrase is only a problem if it gains traction and actually influences decision makers. Traction is certainly possible in the absence of community support and a climate of unresolved conflict. The phrase will not influence outcomes if a strong foundation of support has been developed, and the utility has demonstrated an ability to embrace and manage conflict.

This white paper will have served its purpose if utility leaders come away with a commitment to make sure that the utility’s strategy and communications are focused on ensuring a good policy decision. This means making sure policy makers feel safe enough to give Water Supply Replenishment fair consideration. Every communication activity should be evaluated with an eye to this objective. It is easy to fall into the habit of doing public education and outreach for the sake of public education, or checking the outreach box on the project plan. It is easy to come up with beautiful brochures, posters and media events while not building the relationships with influential audiences, potential opponents, and the actual decision makers. Doing the things necessary to ensure a good policy decision may demand extraordinary effort, may not be glamorous, and may force utility personnel and their consultants out of their comfort zones. However, it is critical to making sure that communities have the opportunity to enjoy the water reliability and water quality benefits that come with Water Supply Replenishment.