

# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

## 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 “Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets”** trust-building objective challenges the utility to understand the positive aspects of conflict, find opponents early, and develop relationships with those who disagree. Interestingly, the case studies illustrate that organized opposition is not likely to occur if you have a compelling problem to solve (clearly improving the current situation), if you clearly describe the benefits of Water Supply Replenishment compared to the other alternatives, and if you develop confidence in the water quality. None of the case studies revealed that the sponsoring utility implemented a systematic process of embracing opponents and developing relationships with them. The projects that were implemented generally avoided conflict due to the nature of the defined problem and key utility behaviors. The other projects were shelved due to significant conflict, and because the community could solve the problem by other means.

**Water Re-Purification Project - San Diego, California** - Opposition seemed to “flare up” during 1998. However, records in the public hearings of 1996 during the process of preparing the environmental impact report showed seeds of public discontent. This was not perceived as being serious because up to that point there had generally been support from leading stakeholders. Eventually, the following issues emerged:

- **“Option of Last Resort”** - The National Research Council report on indirect potable reuse was published in 1998 and although very favorable, the press picked up on one phrase that indirect potable reuse should be used as the “option of last resort” due to lingering concerns about contaminants.
- **Union Tribune Writer Disliked the Project** - Reportedly, one journalist for the *San Diego Union Tribune* never liked the project. This reporter’s opposition inhibited positive coverage of the project.
- **Political “Football”** - A local State politician, Steven Peace, chose to make the project a campaign issue in 1998, positioning himself as “protecting San Diegans” from a “bad project” that would use San Diegans as “guinea pigs.”
- **Environmental Justice** - The North City wastewater comes from some of the more affluent property owners and businesses in La Jolla. The San Vicente Reservoir, projected to receive the reclaimed water, is treated at a plant that serves predominantly west-central San Diego, which is made up of lower- middle class neighborhoods, including Asian, Hispanic and African American communities, and also Mission Valley, including Hotel Circle, an important tourist destination. The city council representative from the 4th District strongly and vocally opposed the project, feeling that an ethnic community had been singled out for an “experimental project.”

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There is no information that suggests that the City of San Diego or the San Diego County Water Authority responded aggressively by reaching out and developing relationships with opponents, nor did they have a base of support similar to Orange County's Groundwater Replenishment System to help the mayor and city council vote for the project. Issues related to politics are addressed in the "Ensuring a Good Policy Decision" case study summary.

**Upper Occoquan Sewage Authority (UOSA) - Virginia** - This is an example where conflict was generally avoided. Why? One important reason was that the project was a response to a well-documented water quality problem. It is difficult to argue with significantly improving water quality. Improvement is a powerful idea, despite the fact that we might make light of "new and improved" product labels. One could argue that the wastewater should have been pumped out of the watershed, but this would have been a major change to the status quo (and customers' experience), and would amount to throwing away a resource. Indirect potable reuse had been going on for years. Now it was time to improve the water quality.

**Water Campus - Scottsdale, Arizona** - This project avoided conflict for several reasons. First, the wastewater was accepted as a valuable resource in the desert, and the city created water quality confidence. Another important factor was that the project champion, the water resources manager, had an excellent relationship with the city council, which helped reduce politically motivated conflict. He also took the editor of the local newspaper to visit Water Factory 21 in Orange County, which was a successful way to develop a positive relationship with the media. Finally, the project was constructed in the northern growth area of the community, so it was not in the backyard of the anti-growth population.

**Clean Water Revival Project - Dublin San Ramon, California** - This project was shelved due to conflict and public perception problems. The project driver was the need for increased wastewater disposal capacity (due to rapid growth), and not the need to increase or enhance the water supply. Opponents felt that the project was actually responding to a need to "build out Dublin" whose growth was already viewed as excessive and negatively impacting the surrounding communities. Also, the sponsoring utility was a wastewater district, so creating water quality confidence was an uphill battle.

There was conflict between the Dublin San Ramon Services District (DSRSD) board and the media over headlines. There is no evidence that DSRSD embraced the opposition, rather opponents felt they were being labeled as "uninformed," "no-growthers," and complaining of "NIMBY" (not in my backyard). Some opponents felt that they were not being heard and that management was condescending. Opponents included a small group with a strong scientific base that produced a report on why the project was unacceptable. Concerns included the feeling that DSRSD had no "water quality plan" to address emerging contaminants. DSRSD did not respond to the report for six months. Opponents also felt that DSRSD was trying to "indoctrinate children" through their school information program. In the end, conflict delayed the approval to start operations. In the interim, a new ocean outfall was approved, "removing the need" for Clean Water Revival.

**Groundwater Replenishment System (GWRS) - Orange County, California** - The Orange County Water District (OCWD) has conducted an extensive outreach campaign related to GWRS. Given their strong message of benefits and their water quality track record, they have avoided quite a bit of conflict. Skeptics have been "turned" due to OCWD's strong message of innovation and water quality leadership, as well as the fact that the outreach staff is very professional and believe strongly in GWRS. Despite this, there has been disagreement from some local water professionals about whether the timing of GWRS makes financial sense. These water professionals felt that the OCWD staff were not listening to their concerns and just repeating their original messages. It is important to note that OCWD's outreach process makes it very difficult for disagreement or conflict to gain traction and actually affect the decision to go ahead with the project. This is because OCWD has developed a long list of influential supporters who have put their support in writing. This list was in place before construction began, and gives policy makers the coverage and confidence to continue their support.