Location: Humboldt Bay, Northern California
Issue: Water Resource Planning
Methodology: 5-stage Public Engagement Process
Date: 2010

In 2009, the Humboldt Bay Municipal Water District (HBMWD) found itself with an unusual problem for California: it had too much water. The district has two water systems: a Domestic Water System providing treated water to area municipalities and an industrial system which had provided untreated water to two local pulp mills and which used 4 to 5 times more water than the municipal system.

Previously, the pulp mills used the entire supply of industrial water, both mills closed resulting in a loss of the entire industrial base for the water supply. Besides the loss in revenue resulting in increased rates for municipal customers, under-utilization of industrial water supply could result in a loss of water rights under California law. The HBMWD Board sought to off-set revenue loss and ensure local control.

The HBMWD Board determined to develop a public engagement process, identifying a broad goal for its procedure to "Set new standards for public processes and avoid the problems that plague many processes, including polarized citizens, bad decisions, stalemate or wasted time and dollars. Specifically the District Board wanted the WRP process to be Participatory, open and fair, efficient and time bound, educational, respectful and clear." Specifically, the Board sought to ensure community understanding of the issue and to understand community priorities in return and to maintain control of HBMWD water resources at a local level.

The Board appointed an Advisory Committee consisting of 3 representatives from the municipal customer group, 9 citizens from multiple stakeholder perspectives and two members of the HBMWD Board to lead the process. It determined a five-phase civic engagement process along a timeline:

Phase 1: June – August 2009

The Advisory Committee took over from the district board to plan the engagement process, working to develop a strategy to increase understanding of stakeholders and the public, gather input, synthesize input, seek public feedback and, finally, build public support to take recommendations before the Board.

Phase 2: September – December 2009

During this phase public engagement really got underway. The Advisory Committee created a Citizens Study Group (CSG) involving stakeholders and citizens randomly selected. The CSG provided a continuity of participation from one stage to the next (different people would come to different public meetings, but the CSG did not change) and also engaged citizens who would not usually attend public meetings.

The Advisory Committee and the CSG suggested criteria that would be used to evaluate proposals. In addition to CSG meetings, the Advisory Committee hosted three separate public meetings where the general public were informed about the issues at hand and were also given the opportunity to offer feedback on the evaluation criteria. These meetings (as well as the public meetings that would follow at later stages in the engagement) took the form of facilitated dialogues. To lead these dialogues, the city worked with Mary Gelinas from the public engagement firm Gelinas-James.

These criteria were gathered into a document called "Framework for Evaluating Water Resource Planning Options" approved by the HBMWD board. Through a synthesis of public suggestions, the Committee identified seven values important to the community in determining water usage. Two of these criteria stood out such that the Advisory Committee elevated them to "threshold criteria." These were 1) maintaining local control of District water rights and 2) making sure the option was legally viable. If a proposal failed to meet the second criteria it would be, effectively, dead in the water. If it failed to meet the first it would go directly against community priorities and HBMWD purposes. Thus, the Advisory Committee determined any proposal *must* meet these to standards to be considered.

If a proposal met the threshold, it would then be evaluated against the remaining five criteria: environmental impact/improvement; community access to water; facilitation of economic development; provision of district cost recovery (would the proposal help cover the district's costs for maintenance, upgrades and/or expansion); and impact on overall quality of life.

Phase 3: January – February 2010

Having established criteria for evaluating proposals, the Advisory Committee was now sought proposals from the public. During this phase a day-long Water Workshop was held to increase public awareness of the issue, legal context, basic categories of possible water use, ecology of the watershed and regional economic considerations.

These were promoted through television, radio, print media and internet sources. The majority of public proposals came through the workshop and public meetings, while others came through informal conversation, email exchanges and social media outlets. In addition, participants were asked to evaluate the process after each meeting.

Phase 4: March – June 2010

With suggestions in, the next step was to consider and evaluate the options. In this phase too, direct public engagement would be vital. The Advisory Committee synthesized all the ideas and organized them into 12 specific options. They did a preliminary analysis of each. This analysis looked at how much water each option would use, how long it would take to develop and implement, how well the option measured against the established evaluation framework and also identified other costs and benefits. Two of the twelve options were set aside during this time because they did not meet the threshold criteria. The Advisory Committee then took the remaining proposals to the CSG and to three public meetings to get feedback from residents on specific proposals.

Phase 5: June – August 2010

Equipped with resident input on the possible options the Advisory Committee prepared recommendations to present to the HBMWD. The final proposal looked grouped and ranked the various recommendations as follows:

Option	**Immediately Pursue**	**Passively Pursue**	**Defer pursuit, pending more info**	**Not Recommended @ this time**
A1. Actively pursue companies that use water	X			
A2. Expand District Boundaries	X			

A3. Develop Lake in Blue Lake		X		
A4. Develop aquaculture for appropriate species		X		
A5. Divert water to Mad River fish hatchery		X		
A6. Develop aquaculture for algae		X		
B1. Sell untreated water to another municipality	X			
B2. Sell untreated water to a private entity		X		
B3. Build a pipeline in NCRA right-of-way to Sonoma	AC unable to reach consensus			
C1. Transfer water (in Mad River watershed) for environmental restoration/enhancement	X			
D1. Develop micro-hydro in watershed		X		

Options A1 – A6 involve ways to use water *within* the districts existing boundaries. Options B1 – B3 involve ways to sell or transfer water for use *outside* the district. Option C1 offers a way to transfer water for environmental enhancement. Option D1 is unique in that, while economically desirable it is a non-consumptive water use and so does not directly address the issue of how to use water.