

Embracing controversy with **confidence**



Orange County Water District representatives provide tours of the water purification facilities to inform the public about the ground water replenishment system and why it is essential for meeting Orange County's future water needs. Photo: Orange County Water District

The most challenging aspect of a municipal water professional's job is not always technology, budgets, and capacity issues. Rather, it is often the increased levels of public attention and conflict over new policies and projects. Managers, engineers, and their customers are finding that they need new public participation strategies to go along with new engineering solutions if they are to meet the water supply needs of growing communities.

A case in point is a project that broke ground in September 2004—a notable success for the type of project that has been a non-starter in many parts of the country. When completed, the Groundwater Replenishment System, a joint project of the Orange County Water District (OCWD) and Orange County Sanitation District in California, will produce 70 mgd of potable water—10% of Orange County's drinking water supply and all from purified sanitary wastewater.

There was certainly controversy. Few potable water reuse projects will avoid the tag line "Toilet to Tap," and Orange County

was no exception. The agencies' approach worked because they assumed conflict would occur, were open to it, planned for it, and responded to it. It's a strategy that other municipalities and utilities can use to not only survive, but thrive. And it's based on sound research.

The following concepts are highlighted in "Best Practices for Developing Indirect Potable Reuse Projects," a 2004 report by The WaterReuse Foundation based on

- Clearly articulate the problem and the improvements expected from the project.
- Evaluate alternatives to reuse (or other proposed projects), and communicate the pros/cons openly.
- Use clear language and words that communicate value—don't accept negative slogans.
- Inform, but don't lecture, and encourage two-way communication about value—the public is the best and perhaps the only true source of information about what people value, which is essential for designing projects on their behalf.
- Start early and embrace potential conflict and opposition.
- Communicate constantly, even after the project is completed.

the experience of Orange County and five other communities: According to Virginia Grebbien, general manager of the OCWD, the utility knew it couldn't avoid controversy based on water reuse projects elsewhere. "We had to be frank with the public—this is purified sewer water," said Grebbien. OCWD also prac-

ticed the principle of owning their own language by consistently articulating valuable aspects of the project, such as calling it a ground water replenishment project, and using the term "sewer water" to reflect that this source includes all wastewater, including water from showers and washing machines. OCWD started its public outreach eight years before breaking ground, a proactive effort that really made a difference.

The agencies' commitment of resources, both to the technology and to communication, is critical. It helps convince the public that their interests are paramount through the project's multiple purification steps: microfiltration, reverse osmosis, ultraviolet light disinfection, and hydrogen peroxide disinfection, followed by filtering the water an additional time through the county's ground water basin and blending it with existing ground water. Investment in communication has been equally thorough, with three staff members going to meetings in every community organization an average of three times a week for years. Other public involvement elements include a Web site, media outreach, and a steering committee comprised of members of the agencies' boards. The focus now is on construction outreach, with two full-time community liaisons who hold weekly community meetings, meet individually with neighbors, and publish a monthly newsletter.

Finally, it is essential not to forget home base. It is as important that everyone on staff, from the engineers to the financial department to customer-service staff to management, all understand the importance of listening to and informing the public. "All of us working together is what made this work," said Grebbien.



— Gail Bingham is president of Resolve Inc., and is based in Washington, D.C.