
Beneficial Uses of Dredged Materials



Fact Sheet: Public Involvement and Outreach

Informing and Involving the Public

The success of beneficial use dredging projects often depends on informing and involving those who feel a project will affect them. Effective public involvement identifies and addresses issues of public concern to be resolved before project implementation. Involving stakeholders can improve the quality of decisions about the beneficial use of dredged material.

The public, represented by groups and individuals, have different levels of interest and concern about beneficial use projects. Therefore, it is important for project sponsors to use a range of methods to inform and involve the public. People participate when they believe a project may have a significant impact on them. They may be motivated by the proximity of the project; by economic, social, or environmental concerns; or by personal values. The concerned public will be different for each beneficial use project, and interest may grow and change as a final decision approaches.

Planning

The best way to effectively involve the public is to develop a public involvement plan that includes active participation by project managers. Managers' philosophical and financial commitment to public outreach is essential from the outset.

In developing a public involvement plan, project sponsors and managers should know who will make key project decisions and when these decisions will be made. The public should be informed and provided the opportunity to be involved sufficiently in advance of these decision points so that any public input is available to, and can be considered by, the decision maker. It is much wiser and more successful to involve the public throughout the process in numerous smaller constituent decisions than to request public approval on a final, complex decision. The public's participation may result in a design somewhat different from the original plan, but it will be more likely to materialize into a successful project.

Think of the public as a circle with concentric rings. In the outer ring are people whose involvement will be limited to receiving information about the project primarily through the media. As long as they are informed and know how to make their views known, they will seek no greater involvement.

People interested in dedicating more time are in the next (second) ring of the circle (moving inward and increasing in involvement). They may be members of civic, religious, or service groups, and can be reached through one-on-one discussion and presentations to their organizations. Informing these people is important because they, in turn, will inform others in the community. In general, individual and personal discussion is extremely important to successful public involvement.

It is important to inform and work closely with elected officials, who are featured in the next (third) ring. Public involvement enhances communication and establishes constructive relationships that foster wise decisions.

Closer yet to the center of the public involvement circle are those directly affected by a project (ring four). These people need and deserve extensive information. They may seek to participate in decision making. People with this level of interest can be reached through direct mail, informal neighborhood meetings, and possible participation on project coordinating committees.

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Project decision makers are at the center (fifth ring) of the circle. Members of the public, particularly representatives of groups with a stake in the outcome of the project, can help government staff make decisions and guide project implementation. A local beneficial uses planning group could be the core group in which other decision makers are included.

It is important to identify a community's concerns about a planned project through research and interviews. This process is useful not only in understanding public opinion about a project but also in identifying "key stakeholders." These are opinion leaders, representatives of important constituencies, elected officials, or others who need to be involved in decision making.

Other Components

Work with the Media. Prepare news releases and press kits.

Neighborhood Forums and Public Meetings. Open house, neighborhood, or other informal and interactive forum formats are preferable to formal public meetings, which tend to be impersonal and acrimonious. If formal public meetings are required, they should validate and ratify decisions that have already been carefully worked through in planning and negotiation with a thoroughly involved public.

Beneficial Use Groups, Local Planning Groups & Regional Dredging Teams. In some regions of the country, agencies responsible for managing dredging have convened beneficial use groups, local planning groups, regional dredging teams, or in some cases a combination of all these groups. These groups may be able to provide the basis for the shared decision making at the center of the public involvement circle. Project sponsors should consider involving representatives of the public in the activities of beneficial use groups.

Effective Public Involvement Helps Projects Succeed

It is essential that project sponsors make clear how public comment and participation will be used, and how public involvement can make a difference in a project. Public participation can add value on several levels, but it can only be successful if project managers are willing to consider the resulting input in their decision-making process. Effective public involvement can be the best way to mobilize needed technical ideas, financial resources, and public support for beneficial use projects.

Keys to Successful Public Involvement

To effectively involve the public, project proponents should:

- Involve the public from the outset. Go to the public; don't wait for the public to come to you.
- Identify and respond to issues of local concern.
- Understand the decision-making process and schedule to identify points of public access.
- Make clear how the public's input will be used.
- Use a variety of methods to inform and involve segments of the public with different levels of interest.
- Involve representatives of the public in project decision making.