

# Why You Need Good Environmental Community Relations: Tales From Beyond the Fence Line

Managers of business operations typically devote most of their time to running their businesses and selling their products. Not infrequently, however, managers find that while they

are concentrating on the bottom line, their neighbors are concentrating on the environmental effects (whether perceived or actual) of their businesses.

When neighbors' concerns boil over, it often takes managers by surprise. Companies may discover too late that they are not prepared to react in ways that address public concerns and limit the damage to their business reputation.

## **The Community Cares—And So Should You**

As a long-time practitioner of environmental community relations/public involvement (CR/PI), I frequently talk with managers for whom the concept of public environmental concerns is an abstraction. If they aren't currently beset by public outcry over an issue related directly to their business or facility, managers may find it difficult to imagine that their neighbors are interested in (or anxious about) aspects of their day-to-day operations.

***Resolve neighbors' concerns before they escalate to open conflict***

When they reach out to community members, however, managers often discover many who are concerned about their environmental performance, particu-

larly when it comes to areas such as chemical risk. Facilities should not assume that their neighbors don't care simply because they don't contact the company to ask questions or express concerns. (See sidebar on "Telephobia.")

Fortunately, community concerns rarely turn into crises. At any given time, most businesses (and government-owned facilities) operate uneventfully, even when neighbors may have questions about their performance or feel annoyed by aspects of their operations (such as occasional odors, noise, or truck traffic).

But neighbors' concerns can erupt into public outcry—often at awkward moments. The catalyst may be an attention-getting incident (such as a fire, spill, or odor excursion). It can also be a more mundane event, such as the public noticing of a

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company's permit application or routine disclosure of information on facility emissions.

### **Making Use of Environmental of CR/PI**

Failing to identify and understand public environmental concerns can be costly in terms of time, money, and reputation. The good news, however, is that CR/PI techniques can often resolve or minimize community conflicts and allay public concerns.

This article presents a collection of mini-cases describing situations involving public environmental concerns that I have encountered in my practice or that have been relayed to me by colleagues. Some of the cases are humorous. Some are highly alarming. And some provide examples of instances where environmental CR/PI techniques have resolved or greatly minimized conflicts between stakeholders and businesses or public-sector facilities.

Managers of businesses or public-sector facilities can hire CR/PI practitioners to help them identify stakeholders and their questions and concerns before sensitive environmental issues reach critical mass. Or if managers are so inclined, they may wish to conduct their own periodic "assessments" of their communities to identify stakeholders and potential issues and engage in outreach work themselves. (See sidebar entitled "What Is Community and Stakeholder Assessment?") We typically recommend that managers do both.

### **What Do Your Neighbors Know About Your Operations?**

Do you know how much your neighbors know—or think they know—about your facility's operations? You may be surprised by what you hear if you ask them. The mini-cases in this section highlight the dangers of misinformation.

### **Telephobia: How "No Calls" Can Spell Trouble**

Many facility managers assume that if residents or officials aren't calling them (either to complain or to ask questions), then their facility has "good relations" with the community. While this *can* be true, lack of calls may also mean:

- Neighbors don't know who to call at the facility, or the facility uses an automated answering system that doesn't provide clear prompts that lead a caller to an individual who can answer their questions. In such cases, questions or concerns may go unanswered—or residents and officials may instead contact a regulatory agency to make their complaints.
- Neighbors are afraid to call. This can be especially true of recent immigrants, who may fear "rocking the boat." But our experience indicates that neighbors of all backgrounds may be intimidated by the idea of calling a facility with complaints or questions. However, if these residents are approached (during interviews, for example), they often are willing to discuss their concerns or ask questions.
- Neighbors believe that others, such as local environmental advocacy group members, have already called to complain, so they don't need to do so themselves. In our assessment interviews, we often discover that neighbors believe other people in the community have called to complain about, for example, odor excursions. We also frequently find that, even in cases of considerable public concern, no one may actually have called the facility because everyone is assuming that someone else has done so. This confusion can lead to substantial bitterness on the part of neighbors, who may believe that facility management is aware of their concerns but is simply ignoring them.
- Neighbors have given up on calling because they believe that no one will take their calls seriously. In these cases, residents and officials may instead call a regulatory agency and attempt to get its staff to act on their behalf.

Convincing neighbors to call a manufacturing or other facility when they have questions or complaints can be an onerous process. Some clients ask, "Why should we work on getting them to call? Isn't it better if they don't call?"

At this point, we remind clients that there is a more important question they need to ask themselves: "Would you rather have people call the state environmental agency with their complaints?" The answer is invariably a resounding "no."

We are frequently amazed when we conduct community interviews. For example, we once surveyed neighborhood residents on behalf of a facility that used rendered animal fats in their manufacturing process. Some interviewees thought our client was sending out crews to pick up dead raccoons, opossums, and other roadkill to use as ingredients!

Even if your facility has reached out to neighbors in the past with information, you shouldn't assume that all is well. Neighborhoods are not static. If the neighborhood where you operate has undergone significant demographic change or population growth, you may need to acquaint new residents with your operations.

We find that many cases of "community relations gone bad" happen when facilities fail to keep up with changing circumstances. Newer residents may have very different views of industry than long-time neighbors. As a result, they may harbor beliefs or concerns that can lead to some whopping misunderstandings. Two of the mini-cases that follow involve the concerns of new neighbors.

### ***Case One: The "Bio-Weapons" Plant Next Door***

Managers of a corn-processing facility wanted to make sure they were on good terms with their residential neighbors. They hadn't done much outreach recently, and the facility had occasional odor excursions. So the managers decided to take action. They wanted their neighbors to understand that the facility odors weren't harmful—and that the company was working to minimize them.

When the company interviewed neighbors, it soon found that many of them did indeed have serious concerns. The neighborhood had "turned over," meaning that most of the residents were new to the area. And unlike the long-time neighbors they replaced, the newer residents were not

familiar with what went on at the corn-processing facility. These new neighbors had, however, heard that the facility operated a "germ unit." Some were convinced that the company was making biological weapons, and they were fearful of the facility.

Based on this finding, facility management decided to engage in neighborhood outreach about their operations. They explained that "germ" referred to "corn germ," a specific part of the corn kernel, rather than to infectious agents. Management also publicized the phone number of a contact at the facility whom the neighbors could call if they wanted to ask questions or report odors.

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### ***Case Two: Good Hygiene or Harbinger of Impending Doom?***

Community interviews that we performed on behalf of a chemical processing facility revealed a wide range of rumors about the facility. This wasn't surprising: Managers at the facility (which had recently been purchased by our client) had never done any outreach work.

The most striking findings had to do with how neighbors interpreted certain employee health and safety practices at the plant. The facility—both before our client purchased it and after—supplied uniforms to all employees who worked in production areas. When the employees completed their shifts, they changed clothes in a facility locker room. Workers removed their uniforms and placed them in hampers for laundering. They then showered and dressed in street clothes before heading home.

Area residents who were aware of this procedure were divided into two camps regarding what it meant. One camp, which included fam-

ily members of some employees at the facility, thought that providing uniforms and showering facilities was great. These folks opined that the facility's management was dedicated to providing a clean and safe work environment and ensuring that workers wouldn't track chemicals back home with them.

The other camp took a far darker view of this procedure. To them, providing uniforms and requiring employees to shower underscored how hazardous the chemicals being processed at the facility were—and how much danger they would pose to the community in the event of an accident.

Once the facility learned about our findings, they launched a strong community outreach

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program, including facility tours. The plant provided information on the chemicals it processed and explained how they were handled to minimize the risk of accidents and employee exposure. Fortunately, by engaging in proactive

outreach, the plant was able to reassure most members of the community that providing uniforms and shower facilities was simply good industrial hygiene, not a “warning sign” of impending danger.

### ***Case Three: New Lessons in an Old Neighborhood***

A manufacturing facility's air permit was up for renewal. The facility's management had performed community outreach work several years earlier, when the plant obtained its initial Title V permit. At that time, management realized outreach was important because the facility's large and visible stack made it the primary local target for complaints regarding odors (despite the

presence of many other odor sources in the area). Management later installed abatement equipment that greatly minimized the intensity and frequency of odors traveling into the neighborhood.

By the time the facility's permit was up for renewal, plant management had not engaged in proactive outreach for some time. However, facility employees who lived in the neighborhood reported that many community “old-timers” (who knew about the facility and the work it had done to control odors) were still active in the area. In addition, the elected officials who represented the neighborhood were the same officials who had been in office during the facility's initial outreach activities. Accordingly, plant management concluded that they didn't need to perform a new round of outreach efforts.

But soon after a public notice regarding the permit renewal was printed in the local newspaper, the facility's managers received a shock: The state environmental agency had received approximately 150 letters complaining about odors and pollution from the facility—and inquiring about whether the emissions could harm the letter writers. Agency personnel informed the facility's managers that, based on this outpouring of concern, they would be holding a formal public hearing to take comments on the permit renewal.

The facility's attorney submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for the letters. Facility management soon learned that they had been sent by students, teachers, and a few parents of students from a nearby charter elementary school that had recently opened approximately three blocks from the facility.

Up to that point, the facility's managers had not realized that a new school was operating nearby—even though stories about the charter school had appeared in the local newspapers, and the opening of the school had also been mentioned during neighborhood meetings, which

an employee of the facility (and resident of the neighborhood) had attended.<sup>1</sup>

Our firm had performed community and stakeholder assessment and other CR/PI work for the facility several years earlier in connection with its initial Title V permit. We were invited back to learn more about the school and why its students and teachers had sent the letters.

We soon learned that the teachers knew very little about the facility (other than its name), but they could see the stack. They also sometimes smelled odors that, based on their descriptions, might have come from the facility or from any of a dozen other, less visible sources.

The odors were bothersome. So after seeing the public notice about the air permit renewal, one of the teachers decided that he could teach his students civic involvement by having them write letters complaining about air pollution to the state environmental agency.

As a result of our interviews, we determined that the students and teachers *did* smell odors

(some of which came from our client's facility), and that this likely would have prompted some complaints. However, had the school's faculty known to call the facility—or, more to the point, if the facility's managers had reached out to school personnel and asked them to call if they had questions or concerns—the letters that triggered a formal public hearing about the permit renewal probably would never have been sent.

### **Establishing a New Operation in (What Turns Out to Be) Hostile Territory**

As members of a firm specializing in CR/PI work, we are periodically called in to scout communities where clients are considering locating new facilities. In some cases, the client is planning to buy an existing structure or an existing business. In other cases, the client is planning to build a new facility from the ground up.

Community assessments of this type can offer crucial insights—and help businesses avoid serious pitfalls. Unfortunately, however, many

### **What Is Community and Stakeholder Assessment?**

Community and stakeholder assessment is a process for identifying stakeholders, their questions and concerns regarding one or more issues, their preferences for giving and receiving information, and the social, economic, and political contexts of the communities in which they live. The assessment process can provide significant insights into the issues, groups, individuals, and community behaviors that business managers need to understand in order to work effectively with their neighbors.

The assessment process typically involves conducting interviews and examining publicly available documents:

- Interviews should cover a cross-section of persons who live in, or have knowledge about, the community. Interviews may be conducted in person or over the phone.
- Document research includes reviewing a range of publicly available information sources, including: local newspapers; stories in other local publications and newsletters (in hard-copy form, online, and in blog commentary); demographic data; land use and economic development plans; permit applications; and documents from state and federal environmental agencies (either on file in local repositories or obtained through FOIA requests).

For more information on community and stakeholder assessment, readers may want to review two of my prior articles for *Environmental Quality Management*:

- Forrest, C. J. (2010, Autumn). Environmental community relations: What can you learn about a community from reviewing publicly available documents? *Environmental Quality Management*, 20(1), 9–23.
- Forrest, C. J. (2010, Winter). Attorneys and public involvement: A powerful combination for resolving environmental conflicts and concerns. *Environmental Quality Management*, 20(2), 17–34.

companies fail to perform this key step. Although businesses understand the need to conduct environmental, legal, and financial due diligence before they purchase property or facilities, they don't always consider what we call "community-based liabilities."

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The following cases illustrate what can happen when businesses fail to consider the presence or impact of community opposition or fail to identify issues that are likely to arise because of changes in the character of nearby land uses. Two of the cases in this section had bad outcomes for the businesses involved. The last case describes how a company managed to avoid making what would have been a bad purchase.

#### ***Case Four: One Million Dollars Down the Drain***

A construction company had plans to tear down its old asphalt plant and build a new facility at another location in an industrial area located within the same municipality as the original plant. The company had already begun decommissioning the old plant and remediating the existing site as it moved ahead with its plans to build a new facility.

The company thought it had established decent relations with the municipality. However, as it proceeded through the process of seeking approval to construct the new plant, its managers soon realized that something was wrong. After several meetings with municipal officials, it became clear that the municipality did not want a new asphalt plant built within its limits—even in an area zoned for industry.

The company finally recognized that construction of the new asphalt plant wasn't going

to happen. By that point, however, the company had already spent approximately \$1 million preparing for the move.

We didn't work on this particular case, which was unfortunate. It is likely that some minimal research would have revealed that plans for the new asphalt plant were in peril. Even a day or two of document research (reviewing official files, such as municipal planning and zoning documents and master plans, and local newspaper stories on environmental and industry issues), along with a few interviews of municipal planning staff members and other officials, would probably have brought the key issues to light. Learning of this problem earlier in the process would have saved the construction company time and money—and would have allowed its management to begin looking for a more suitable new site before remediation at the old site was under way.

#### ***Case Five: Lies, Upscale Residences, and Public Outrage***

A waste management company purchased an existing building within a small industrial park. It planned to operate a Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) treatment, storage, or disposal facility (TSDF) to manage hazardous wastes. Because the building was located in an industrial park in a rural area on the outskirts of a small town, the company didn't anticipate any problems.

Unfortunately for the company, permitting of the facility proved to be a nightmare. Owners of "upscale" homes that had been built on rezoned property nearby protested vigorously to the state environmental regulatory agency and brought political pressure to bear against the waste management company.

After attempts to obtain a facility permit were met with major resistance, a colleague of ours conducted a stakeholder and community assess-

ment that included interviews and a review of local newspaper stories. The assessment revealed that the property on which the upscale homes were built had been rezoned as a favor to a local politician. The homes had been constructed by a politically connected builder. The people who bought the homes had been assured that the nearby industrial park was slated to be closed, so it wouldn't disturb their idyllic surroundings. Although these assurances were false, the purchasers believed them.

Both the circumstances surrounding the politically motivated rezoning and the false promises regarding the industrial park were well known to local officials. This information would almost certainly have turned up during a community assessment—had the company thought to perform one before it purchased the building.

In reality, there were no official plans to close the industrial park. The homeowners in the upscale residential development had been lied to. But they continued to oppose the TSD permit application, and the waste management company could not overcome their opposition. After several long years of acrimonious public meetings, the company decided to cut its losses and seek a new location.

This case involved an interesting (an instructive) postscript: By the time the waste management company decided to find a new location, some of its neighbors were so angry that they traveled to the town where the company hoped to build its new facility. These neighbors proceeded to whip up opposition against the company among the new town's residents, creating another round of acrimony—and proving that when serious conflicts gather steam, they can take on lives of their own.

### ***Case Six: The Gentrifying Industrial Park***

One of our chemical industry clients was considering the purchase of an existing facility. On

paper, the facility looked good. A map of the area showed that the facility was located in an industrial park and that the land behind it was owned by a railroad. Thus, the facility seemed to be situated in an appropriate area. There appeared to be no homes within at least a quarter of a mile, suggesting that the client could continue to operate at the location well into the future.

The character of the surrounding area (and particularly the lack of nearby residences) was important to our client because the facility manufactured large quantities of a chemical that was both toxic and ignitable. Our client planned to continue producing this substance at the site.

Before moving forward with the purchase, the client asked us to take a closer look at the area where the facility was located. As it turned out, this extra measure of due diligence was fortuitous. Our document research, a trip to the facility, and interviews with local officials revealed a far different picture of the area than the current land-use maps showed:

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- The industrial park where the facility was located had “gentrified.” Some of the larger buildings within a few blocks of the facility had been converted into nonindustrial uses, including a multiplex movie theater, a kids' party center with amenities such as laser tag, and outlet stores. Some of the smaller buildings in the park (buildings that were literally across the street from the facility) had been converted into a kiddie gymnastics school and a daycare center.
- Interviews with local officials revealed that the “railroad” property had recently been purchased by the brother of a state senator,

and was being fast-tracked for development of luxury townhomes. Although a railroad had indeed owned the property previously, it had never used the land, which was considered suitable for residential development.

Not surprisingly, our client took a pass on this particular property once it learned of our findings. The company purchased another facility where it could continue to operate without undue community concern well into the future.

### **Lingering Concerns After a Crisis**

Whenever there is an industrial incident (such as a fire, explosion, or chemical release), communicating with the media—and often with local officials and neighbors too—can be a crucial (though daunting and exhausting) task. Good communication

during and immediately after a crisis can allay fears and help defuse a potentially volatile situation. Effective communication can help people understand what has happened and inform them about the steps the company will take to minimize a recurrence.

But good initial communication is not enough. Companies also need to follow up. In particular, they should perform follow-up interviews to determine whether their crisis communication response has genuinely addressed their neighbors' concerns.

The following mini-cases provide two examples of how neighbors' attitudes toward crises and the facilities where they occur can be shaped by the way crisis communication is handled, both initially and later on.

### ***Case Seven: Chemical Release and Evacuation of a Neighborhood***

Professionals from our firm conducted a follow-up assessment several months after a chemical release crisis at a facility. In this case, the release of an air-toxic chemical had forced the 2:00 a.m. evacuation of a nearby neighborhood. The incident was a very frightening event, even though no one was physically injured. The managers of the facility, with our assistance, worked hard to provide information to the media and the community. They also offered medical examinations for affected residents and provided opportunities for follow-up communication to residents who were interested.

The incident had happened only a few months before our follow-up assessment. Surprisingly, however, nearly all of the persons interviewed (including all of the neighbors we spoke to) treated the incident as a low-priority concern. Most gave precedence to other issues, mentioning the chemical release either fourth or fifth on their list of concerns. Many had to be asked specifically about the incident because they didn't bring it up on their own.

The interviews revealed that both community residents and local officials were basically satisfied with the facility management's response to the crisis. They were also satisfied with management's explanation of what had happened and with what the company was planning to do to minimize the likelihood of recurrence.

This is what we call "closure." The persons who were interviewed had not forgotten the incident, and they certainly weren't pleased that it had happened. But because they were satisfied with how it was handled, the incident had ceased to be a top-of-the-mind issue and no longer represented an active concern to them.

### ***Case Eight: Plant Explosion and Impact on Nearby Residents***

In stark contrast to Case Seven, an incident at another location was still top-of-mind for resi-

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dents in a nearby neighborhood—even though it had occurred ten years earlier. In this case, we were conducting interviews on behalf of another facility located near the plant where the accident occurred.

When we asked residents of the neighborhood what they thought of their industrial neighbors, the first thing most of them mentioned was the explosion at the other facility. This explosion had cracked or blown out windows at some homes in the neighborhood—although fortunately no one was injured.

Residents described the incident in vivid, immediate terms. They talked about the sound of the explosion, the way the earth shook, and the way the fire in the distance looked. Clearly, the memory of this event had not faded. Indeed, it was still very much on people’s minds, despite the passage of a decade.

In this case, managers at the facility where the explosion occurred had done little to reach out to the surrounding community after the incident. The company paid insurance claims for broken or cracked windows but never apologized for the accident. Management also never provided any substantial information to the neighbors about what had happened or what the company was doing to prevent similar incidents in the future. As a result, residents continued to worry that another blast could occur at any time.

Ironically, the company that owned the facility where the explosion occurred had in fact made a number of changes to minimize potential off-site consequences, both from explosions and from releases of air-toxic chemicals. Unfortunately, however, the facility’s managers had not seen fit to share this information with their frightened neighbors.

### **Good Outcomes in Difficult Situations**

As the cases discussed so far make clear, public concerns and conflicts with neighbors can create

serious problems for businesses. But these problems need not be insurmountable obstacles.

The most significant conclusion I have reached from approximately 20 years of CR/PI experience is that, in many cases, it is in fact possible to establish positive and substantive dialogues with the public, even on serious and complex environmental, health, and safety issues. Such dialogue can lead to good relations between facilities and their neighbors and other stakeholders.

There is no single template for successful environmental community relations. But the ingredients that lead to success include a willingness to:

- listen to, seek out, and understand community concerns and
- share information and answer questions within an on-going dialogue.

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The final three mini-cases discussed in the sections that follow highlight how businesses have successfully navigated the stormy waters of community conflict. As these cases make clear, the companies did so by understanding public concerns and sharing information with stakeholders with the goal of addressing problems and establishing well-informed and durable relations.

### ***Case Nine: Tracking Down Odors in the Neighborhood***

A state environmental agency was about to slap an enforcement action on a large manufac-

turing facility because of odor excursions. The agency was responding to numerous complaints about odors from the facility's neighbors.

The facility's attorney engaged our firm to conduct interviews of neighbors and local officials to better define community concerns and beliefs about the issue. These interviews revealed some enlightening facts:

- Based on neighbors' descriptions of odors and the times they were detected, it was clear that residents were smelling odors emanating from many different sources, not just from our client's facility.
- Residents were ascribing all the odors they detected to our client's facility in part because it was large and visible (the facility was located in an area populated by many smaller manufacturers).
- Residents were also ascribing odors to our client's facility because the business had been in the neighborhood for many years and was well known (unlike some smaller businesses in the area, many of which were tucked into old industrial buildings).
- Employees of a neighboring business told us they were most bothered by odors that occurred when a sludge tank on our client's property was opened and its contents were transferred to a tanker truck for disposal (these employees had never made complaints to the state agency or to our client's managers). The sludge-tank operation was carried out in mid-morning, when the business neighbor's employees were present and the windows of the building where the business operated were open. Although residential

neighbors didn't experience these particular odors, this business neighbor had been experiencing them for years.

With this information in hand, our client's facility was able to take effective action. Facility representatives met with neighbors and local officials, and ultimately with state agency personnel. These meetings led to the following results:

- Residential neighbors were provided with information that allowed them to differentiate between the occasional odors coming from our client's facility and the far more numerous odors emanating from other sources.
- Facility managers were made aware of the need to work on abating the odors their operations were creating. Management set up a dedicated phone line to handle odor complaints, publicizing the number on flyers distributed at community meetings. Input from neighbors helped facility managers identify the processes that were most likely to be emitting odors.
- The facility made arrangements to have the contents of its sludge tank transferred to a tanker truck at five in the morning—before employees of the neighboring business arrived for work.
- Residents and local officials got to know the facility's managers—and the managers gained an understanding of the neighborhood that they had never had before.
- The pending enforcement action was dropped by the state agency.

This facility still had to work on abating odors, but it was no longer being blamed for odors emanating from other businesses. Moreover, both the residential neighbors and the state agency were willing to give the facility's managers the time they needed to address the odors emitted by their operation.

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### ***Case Ten: Discovery of “New” Contamination Revives Old Anger***

A company that recycled hazardous waste purchased an existing, large-scale solvent recycling facility that was undergoing a RCRA Facilities Investigation/Corrective Measures Study (RFI/CMS). Contamination at the facility had been of significant concern to the nearby community and to the many dairy farmers in the vicinity. But most of the contamination, which dated to before the passage of RCRA, had been cleaned up by the time the recycling company purchased the facility.

Concerns about contamination erupted anew after the state environmental agency released information stating that polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) had been found in the sediment of a creek that ran through the facility. The PCBs were detected in low parts-per-million concentrations.

The recycling company hired our firm to conduct an assessment of the community and determine how best to communicate with some very angry and worried people. Our assessment revealed that none of the previous owners of the facility had provided information on the remediation work that had been done at the site. As a result, most of the area’s residents and officials did not realize that the contamination at the facility had been largely cleaned up. Residents and officials were particularly angry about the recent discovery of PCBs in the creek sediment. They believed this indicated that the new owner of the facility was dumping even more hazardous waste on the property.

This case culminated in a large, agency-ordered public meeting. Before it reached that point, however, the company held numerous small-group and one-on-one meetings with persons who were especially concerned. We were able to defuse anger over the PCBs by demonstrating (through historical documents) that they most likely represented residual contamination that had not been detected when the initial

samples were collected as part of the RFI/CMS process in the early 1980s. We explained that laboratories at the time were unable to detect PCBs at concentrations as small as the low parts per million. We also made available to meeting participants several old memos authored by state agency personnel on the limitations of laboratory testing in the early 1980s.

The presence of detectable PCBs in the creek sediment meant that our client would have to perform additional remediation work. But we were able to address stakeholder concerns by providing facility neighbors and residents and officials of the nearby town with key information (including a history of the work already done at the site and our client’s plans for addressing PCB contamination in the sediment). Even more importantly, we were able to lay the groundwork for good, ongoing communication between the facility’s managers and the community.

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### ***Case Eleven: An Unlikely Ally***

A facility asked our firm to help plan for a public meeting that was required under the Clean Air Act’s Risk Management Program.<sup>2</sup> The meeting requirements applied to facilities that stored certain toxic or ignitable chemicals in amounts that, if accidentally released, could harm persons beyond the fence line. Facilities were required to communicate information about these chemicals to their communities.

Several years before the required public meeting, the facility had experienced a release of a gaseous toxic substance. The substance had traveled a considerable distance off-site in potentially harmful concentrations.

This incident, which occurred in an urban area, brought considerable negative news coverage and scrutiny from local environmental advocacy groups. However, the incident also resulted in significant changes at the facility in personnel, equipment, and procedures. The new equipment and procedures had greatly increased the safety of chemical handling at the facility, and the new environmental manager who had been hired had a strong interest in working with the community.

Although our firm worked with facility management to plan for their Risk Management Program public meeting, much of the groundwork had already been laid by the new environmental

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manager. The environmental manager and our consultant met with various persons and groups, both to explain the reason for the public meeting and to describe what the facility had done to improve safety and

spill prevention. In addition, we helped put together a presentation on the facility, including information on its accident prevention and emergency response programs and accidental release scenarios.

We publicized the upcoming meeting in local newspapers and community bulletins. We also sent invitations (and made follow-up phone calls) to local officials and other persons known to be interested in or concerned about the facility, inviting them to attend the public meeting.

The meeting was held before a decent-sized crowd that included neighbors, officials, environmental advocacy group members, and several reporters. Both the facility manager and the environmental manager gave detailed presentations regarding chemical risk and how it was managed at the facility. They also fielded questions from the audience.

Toward the end of the meeting, a part-time reporter asked a question couched within a confrontational statement. The question suggested that the facility must be a very dangerous place if it had to have an accident prevention program. Before either the environmental manager or the facility manager could respond, one of the more outspoken leaders of a local environmental advocacy group—a group that had been very critical of the facility when it had experienced its accident several years earlier—told the reporter that he didn't know what he was talking about.

She went on to tell him (and the rest of the audience) that the facility's managers were doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing. She added that the managers should be commended, both for improvements to the facility and for their openness. This environmental advocate wasn't backing down from her stance on chemical safety. But she had been impressed by the work that facility management had done to improve safety and initiate pollution prevention initiatives, and she was willing to say so.

No one was more surprised by this than the facility manager. He had initially been leery of inviting this particular environmental advocate but he emerged from the meeting a true believer in the power of open discussion.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The costs of ignoring public concerns about facility operations can be high, as several of the mini-cases discussed here amply demonstrate. Fortunately, it is possible for managers to work with stakeholders (such as neighbors) to resolve or minimize conflicts—although the longer conflicts and concerns fester, the more time-consuming and difficult it becomes to address them.

Getting to know community issues and stakeholders may seem like a less pressing priority than managing day-to-day operations at your company. But managers who pay attention to

their communities (or at least designate a staff member to do so) can often detect the potential for community opposition or conflict before it flares into the open.

This “early warning” can give companies a chance to defuse situations that might otherwise prove costly and damaging to their reputations. Managers who invest in environmental community relations usually find that it is time (and money) well spent.

## Notes

1. In this case, it appears that (1) the employee who attended the meetings didn't recognize that the opening of a new

school a few blocks away from the facility might be a significant issue that should be brought to management's attention and (2) management either didn't see the newspaper stories or, like the employee who attended neighborhood meetings, didn't make the connection that the presence of a new school in the neighborhood meant that the facility needed to reach out to school staff to ensure that if they had questions, they knew whom to call.

Situations like this—where information is available, and may even be known to facility personnel, but isn't recognized as significant—are commonplace. We counsel our clients to designate an employee to conduct regular reviews of community news and report items of interest to senior management. However, it can take practice for employees to know what might be of relevance. In this case, the incident provided management with additional understanding about the types of neighborhood news and activities they should be looking for.

2. The Risk Management Program is spelled out in the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 at section 112(r).

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