

## PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

# Grassroots Outreach Critical for Ethanol Plant Approval

By Mary Claire Lanser

Despite the seemingly obvious benefits ethanol plants provide farmers and the local communities where they're located, projects are often controversial when first proposed. Opponents circulate misinformation and local officials become conflicted when faced with land use decisions such as annexation, rezoning and conditional use. In addition, those proposing a plant are concerned about expensive delays caused by a lack of community consensus and public support. No one wants their application tabled because public officials don't see enough support in the room to move forward with a vote.



Lanser

Public affairs strategies are a key to securing approvals and preventing delays for proposed ethanol plants throughout the country. The information released to the public is coordinated and professional when an ethanol plant developer and public affairs consultant are in sync with timelines, style and message. From the initial news release through the final vote, the developer should be respected for all efforts to make

the proposal widely understood and accessible.

An ethanol project's success or failure can oftentimes be traced to its level of grassroots support. In order to develop support, it's usually best to map out the approval process and work backward to schedule specific grassroots activities.

### A Grassroots Activities Toolbox

The following are some grassroots outreach activities that have proven successful in winning community support for ethanol plants:

- ▶ Develop and define a public affairs strategic plan
- ▶ Quantify economic benefits to the community
- ▶ Design a dynamic Web site
- ▶ Develop information binders and place them in key locations for public access
- ▶ Visit nearest neighbors door-to-door
- ▶ Host public information meetings and supporter rallies
- ▶ Produce a summary of frequently asked questions, answers and talking points
- ▶ Make presentations to local civic organizations
- ▶ Recruit speakers and facilitate public comments made at public meetings

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Building support for an ethanol plant among local residents is an effective grassroots outreach strategy that can yield positive votes for the project from elected officials.

- ▶ Facilitate letters to the editors of local newspapers
- ▶ Work closely with local media
- ▶ Maintain continuous contact with elected officials and influential community leaders.

### Grassroots Communications in Action

A recent example of successful grassroots communications in action is Didion Ethanol LLC, a 50 MMgy project under construction in Columbia County, Wis. The project faced organized opposition and a history of controversy, which needed to be reversed with factual information and the active participation of supporters.

A successful combination of community relations activities achieved the needed support. The grassroots communications effort included informational meetings and information binders

given to each town official and county supervisor, typically as part of a one-on-one meeting. Information binders were placed on reserve in all nine Columbia County public libraries for citizens to review and make copies. Supporters attended rallies and helped with calls and letters to public officials and letters to local newspapers. Each county supervisor received more than 75 original letters—no form letters—from Didion Ethanol supporters.

When it came time for the vote, the county board room was filled with people wearing white and green "Ethanol Yes!" buttons, Didion Ethanol feed caps and Didion T-shirts. When a majority of the county board voted in favor of the plant, the room erupted in a celebration by supporters who had worked together for six months to make it happen.

In April 2007, the village of Cambria held a referendum asking residents if Cambria should negotiate with Didion about a road and other details of the ethanol plant. Referendums are hard to win, but it passed by a large majority. Construction of Didion Ethanol LLC is on schedule, with completion estimated for late 2007.

John Didion, CEO of Didion Milling, the company behind the ethanol plant, is a believer in the power of grassroots support. "I don't know if we would have succeeded in getting our approvals without the support we generated in the community through proactive communications," Didion says.

### Overcoming Opposition through Communication

Another and earlier example of garnering support through grassroots outreach is Utica Energy LLC, a 52 MMgy plant in Winnebago County, Wis. Utica began production in 2003, becoming the third ethanol plant to be built in the state. The project initially faced strong organized opposition.

While the ethanol plant site and its surrounding properties were located in a rural area, nearby residents were actively opposed to the proposal. They were joined by civic and business leaders from the city of Oshkosh. With the help of an outside consulting firm, the opposition formed a group called STEP, which stood for "Stop the Ethanol Proposal." The project's opposition touted concerns including noise, odor, traffic, pollution, railroad access, fire hazards and groundwater issues.

**Ethanol**  
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In Winnebago County, like other rural ethanol communities, the main opposition came from residents that bought small rural lots so they could commute to work in the city and reside in the beauty of farm country. Occasionally, when people move to "the country," they don't want the area to change. This is often in direct conflict with area farmers who understand how ethanol projects boost rural economies and support the farming lifestyle.

The vote to approve the needed rezoning ultimately rested with the Winnebago County board, a body divided almost in half by supervisors representing the city of Oshkosh and supervisors representing rural areas and smaller communities. Through a strategically developed and successfully executed public affairs strategy, the rezoning received full approval by the town of Utica and Winnebago County.

Final approval was obtained at a standing-room only meeting where area farmers filled the front rows. The vote in favor of rezoning crossed typical alliances and passed with a small majority.

None of the nightmares anticipated by the opponents were realized, and the reputation of the plant's owners was enhanced

by the professional manner in which the approvals were obtained. It's safe to say that the plant would not have succeeded without grassroots outreach.

### A Powerful Tool in the Approval Process

Not all plant proposals require intensive public affairs work. Many ethanol plant developers enjoy early and sustained support from residents, and they contract for limited public affairs assistance to clearly illustrate their proposals and provide answers to anticipated questions to ensure ongoing support and prevent delays. When public affairs strategies are well-planned and executed, and conducted in a respectful manner, they can build support among residents that impresses planning commissions and local boards.

Public officials shouldn't be responsible for explaining the applicant's proposal to their constituents. It is the responsibility of the ethanol plant developer to tell the ethanol story and demonstrate what an ethanol plant would mean to the community. It isn't enough for the developer to just tell people what is proposed; the developer must listen. Once a partnership is forged with residents, they'll not only understand the project, but care enough to devote time to demonstrating support. If all goes well, the ethanol producer becomes a valuable member of the community even before the ground is broken. **EP**

Mary Claire Lanser is president of Lanser Public Affairs, a Wisconsin firm specializing in ethanol plant approvals. Lanser has been tailoring public affairs strategies since securing local approval of Utica Energy in 2001. She is working on her 12th ethanol plant approval for International BioEnergy Virginia LLC. Reach Lanser at [lanser@wi.rr.com](mailto:lanser@wi.rr.com) or (262) 797-7876.

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