

YES, IN MY



**A Colorado utility finds that
public involvement paves the
way for construction projects**

Gail Connors

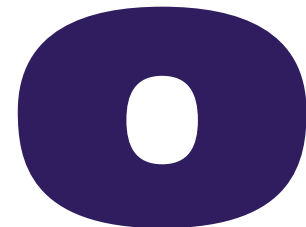
BACKYARD



Colorado Springs (Colo.) Utilities relies on “issues management” to complete projects — such as the construction of its Northern Water Reclamation Facility (NWRF) — on time and under budget. “Without the public process we used for NWRF, we probably could have ended up building a new parallel [8 mi.] interceptor,” said Dennis Auge, NWRF project manager.



Lisa Mills, Colorado Springs Utilities Issues Management Department manager, emphasizes a proactive approach. “If we get a call from a project manager after an incident occurs, it’s really too late,” she said.



On any given day, Lisa Mills, Issues Management Department manager at Colorado Springs (Colo.) Utilities, can be overheard saying, “How can I help you?” For those who know her, these five words are almost as frightening as learning that you just had a construction project accident and five news crews are at the scene.

The sincerity of the question belies the real issue. It’s her way of letting you know that either something is amiss and needs to be addressed immediately, or you just messed up — big time.

Mills uses that phrase because it’s at the core of Springs Utilities’ Issues Management philosophy. “We stress that it’s important to seize opportunity or avert risk before business operations or the reputation of Colorado Springs Utilities is affected,” she said. “To do that, we take a proactive, not reactive, approach. Issues management is not crisis management. If we get a call from a project manager after an incident occurs, it’s really too late.”

Conceived from the utility’s reorganization effort called Rise and Shine by Design in 2000, “issues management” at Colorado Springs is a blend of project management, strategic planning, public process and participation, informed consent, environmental scanning, and public affairs.

How Issues Management Was Born

Although several reasons existed for Colorado Springs to implement an Issues Management Department, one particular project convinced the utility to change the way it did business with customers — forever. The turning point came in the late 1980s, when Springs Utilities was ready to build a fully designed water treatment facility near two local storage reservoirs. These reservoirs just happened to be in the backyard of several upscale neighborhoods. A group of five citizens, through a sophisticated and organized effort, were able to convince the Colorado Springs City Council (also the Utilities Board), to reverse an earlier decision to build the facility.

As a result, Springs Utilities lost credibility with customers and spent thousands in redesign costs. The utility had to spend even more money in extensive public process efforts that resulted in the construction of a 13-km-long (8-mi-long) dual pipeline from the original local reservoirs’ location to an existing water treatment plant and back to the neighborhoods in the reservoir area for delivery of treated water. Now the project had an impact on many neighborhoods, not just one. Homes were moved. Roads were changed. It was a mammoth undertaking, a valuable lesson learned, and it underscored the need for Issues Management to be integrated as part of the reorganization effort.

The main risk associated with implementing Issues Management was cultural acceptance. Many project managers simply didn’t understand the role issues management played in overall project management — until they saw the results. Frankly, some project managers viewed public outreach and participation efforts as a waste of time and were scornful of having to include them in a project. To quote one manager following the formal launch of the new department, “I love you ladies, but get out of the way.”

Later, that same manager, following the one and only public meeting needed to gain acceptance for a project, felt compelled to tell Issues Management that the process hadn’t been that painful after all. “It looks like there may be benefits in what you do after all,” he said. That portion of the project was completed 2 months ahead of schedule.

Paving the Way for Projects

“Springs Utilities incorporated and embraced public process since the 1980s,” Mills said, “but the final culmination of an Issues Management Department in 2000 [helped us] use risk analysis to reduce costs and improve service, identify and implement ways for citizen-owners to benefit, and enhance public involvement in the planning and decision-making processes.”

Issues Management is not alone in its endeavors. To be effective, issues management requires the involvement of the chief executive officer, division officers, project sponsors, project managers, core team members, and Issues Management staff.

Dennis Auge is the project manager for the Northern Water Reclamation Facility (NWRWF), a major addition to the utility which at press time was still under construction. “Without the public process we used for NWRWF, we probably could have ended up building a new parallel interceptor from our northern interceptor to the only existing treatment plant, which would have been roughly 8 miles [13 km] away. We would’ve needed to expand the plant from 65 mgd to 100 mgd [246,000 m³/d to 378,500 m³/d].”

Construction of the interceptor would have involved substantial construction through a downtown corridor, at an additional cost of \$30 million. Public involvement altered that course. For the first time since the 1930s, Colorado Springs Utilities began a phased construction of a new 113,550-m³/d (30-mgd) water reclamation facility in a downtown area, a feat that even surprised Springs Utilities.

“We met early on with a variety of groups, not just those located directly next to the site,” Auge explained. “The Council of Neighbors and Organizations [CONO], and businesses, helped us design architectural features and colors. We did not have as much opposition as we anticipated, because we addressed their concerns about odors, traffic issues and aesthetics.”

CONO President Jan Doran concurred. “The Northern Water site is surrounded on three sides by dense residential and commercial areas,” she said. “There were legitimate concerns about the smell, as well as pedestrian and auto traffic. We had the opportunity to weigh in on our hopes and desires, and it was well-received. The cost of the project wasn’t our nemesis. We wanted to know whether waste treatment would fit in with our neighborhood.”

A Creek Runs Through It

Ruxton Creek lies west of Colorado Springs

and was one of the first water sources to bring flow to the city in the late 1800s. The creek carries water from the southeast side of Pikes Peak, through the city of Manitou Springs, to the Mesa Water Treatment Plant in Colorado Springs. In 1878, a 200-mm (8-in.) pipe was installed in Ruxton Creek. In 2001, Springs Utilities decided to upgrade the Manitou Intake in the creek to capture water more efficiently.

“The water line had three different size pipes,” Mills said. “We couldn’t capture the water as fast as it was being delivered, so we were losing an opportunity to transfer water per our water rights to the treatment plant.”

According to Mills, the pipes were “bigger, smaller, bigger, smaller,” and consequently water velocity was capped at what they pipes could handle in terms of volume.

Fearing that Springs Utilities would dry up the creek, a group of Manitou Springs citizens and Ruxton Creek neighbors rallied against the project.

“We weren’t really against the project,” said Val St.Cloud, a Ruxton Creek neighbor. “But we were wary.”

An 18-year resident and former Manitou Springs council member, St.Cloud said the whole town was angry. “Utilities was not going to let any water come down the creek,” St.Cloud said. “It was inflammatory, since the perception was that Springs Utilities was overbearing in its use of power and rights, but then wanted to work with us to complete the project.”

The groups were concerned about the lack of water along a scenic waterway, and the potential for West Nile Virus. Adding to the dilemma, the project was planned during a 300-year drought. Regardless of the typical normal flows that were above precipitation, opponents struggled with the idea that Springs Utilities wouldn’t dry up the

The 113,550-m³/d (30-mgd) Northern Water Reclamation Facility was still under construction at press time.





A dome is lowered onto a clarifier during construction. Since the Northern Water Reclamation Facility is surrounded on three sides by residential and commercial areas, addressing residents' concerns about odors, traffic, and aesthetics was a high priority.

creek, when it was already at a record low.

The project was at an impasse for nearly 2 years while Springs Utilities and the City of Manitou Springs tried to resolve the issue.

"The original plan was scaled down eventually," St.Cloud said. "As a council member at that time, I was nervous. I don't think anyone was really against the project, but we were concerned with mitigating factors, such as displacing and uprooting the neighborhood."

A construction permit was delayed, the nine residents living next to the creek wanted to have the water, and Springs Utilities' philosophy was that the water must go to residents who pay for it. During that time, the residents educated themselves on water rights and sought to enter an agreement with Springs Utilities to sell them water down the creek.

Eventually, in 2004, Springs Utilities and the City of Manitou Springs entered into an agreement that would divert at least 7 L/sec (0.25 ft³/sec) down Ruxton Creek from its diversion point to Manitou Springs from April 1 to Oct. 31 at an annual cost of \$1950. In the event of surplus water, such as a flood, Springs Utilities would allow more water to flow down the creek according to the agreement.

The agreement came after much debate and hard feelings — initially. One frustrated anonymous individual dammed the intake. Mills coordinated a series of public meetings with the city and nine residents living adjacent to the creek.

"What we realized was that to complete the project, we also had to replace a pipeline that literally sits in the middle of Ruxton Avenue," Mills said. "That required road closures and relocating those residents — never an easy task."

Ruxton Creek neighbor Charles Case added that the residents had much to say to Mills during their discussions.

"The road was not paved, and we've seen it routinely wash out," Case said. "We wanted Springs Utilities to pave the road and keep the riparian creek side intact. Lisa displayed infinite patience in dealing with some of the neighbors, and in the end, all objections were mitigated."

Because Ruxton Avenue had to be closed, and homes wouldn't have any electricity, leaving them dark, vacant and vulnerable, the utility posted a security guard during construction. In addition, Springs Utilities replaced culverts, all utility lines, and replaced part of a broken wall that was built in 1876.

"I was told that the water chamber that ran under the road in front of my house wouldn't make any noise," St.Cloud added. "So, I was surprised when I quite clearly heard the water rushing. Springs Utilities came back and insulated the pipe. Now, it's pretty quiet."

Mills said that residents and concerned citizens offered input on the project and provided valuable information on how the line was laid, soil content, and how to work in a relatively confined space. In the end, the project had signed agreements with all the residents that included a food and residence allowance for 19 days during construction, with extensions if needed. The project paved the entire road and added landscaping to the street as well.

"We still finished it on time and under budget," Mills said. "That's what we strive for. We had a little ceremony after it was completed, and Utilities staff walked alongside the residents to discuss the successes and areas of improvement of the project."

"I'm a product person, not a process person," St.Cloud said. "Proof lies in the product. To be successful, any utility needs to be forthcoming with all information and treat everyone fairly. Concerns must be listened to, and when you work with people, they are going to be more amenable to buying into a project."

"One basic thing that was top notch with the Ruxton project was that Springs Utilities worked directly with residents," Case added. "People want to say their piece and have their concerns addressed."

Steps To Ensure Success

Each project is different. But for each issue brought to their attention, Issues Management

Department staff members follow the same set of procedures.

Step 1: Issue Analysis

The issue analysis — a bridge between issue identification and mitigation — is always the starting point for the Issues Management Department. It provides the issues manager and project management or subject matter expert the opportunity to discuss a series of questions. Participants identify the major stakeholders and potential issues. They evaluate the volatility of a situation by giving it a rating of 1 (low), 2 (medium), or 3 (high). If a project rated a 3, it's assumed that the project could have immense personal impact, emotional appeal, media interest, or special interest group involvement.

Step 2: Issue Brief

Once the analysis is complete, the issues manager writes an issue brief, which is a comprehensive issue outline for Springs Utilities management and its board. The issue brief is the forerunner of all public communication tools. It provides information on the specific problem, the driving forces behind it, and any implications for the utility. This brief is housed on the Utilities database and is available to all internal stakeholders. Information gleaned from the brief also is documented in the issue log database, which prioritizes and ranks the projects by color: red (high), yellow (medium), or green (low).

Step 3: Action Plan

After completing the issue brief, the utility drafts a combined public participation and communications plan, called the Integrated Public Affairs Strategy and Action Plan, which takes several citizen planning objectives into consideration when formulating a plan for public information and outreach. Fifteen objectives are reviewed for relevancy and divided into categories, such as responsibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness. After viewing these objectives against the stakeholder and potential issue document, the issues manager drafts a plan of action, which incorporates several citizen outreach techniques. This technique is based on the philosophy and training of Hans and Annemarie Bleiker, owners of The Institute for Participatory Management and Planning (Monterey, Calif.). This management philosophy includes

- public meetings,
- town meetings,
- content advisory groups,
- development of project-specific collateral materials,

- sharing and making presentations to civic and other groups or organizations,
- surveys,
- development of a listening log,
- creation and use of Springs Utilities' Web site, and
- linking to partner Web sites.

At every opportunity, Spring Utilities shares public input and comment with all stakeholders. All public meetings are summarized and sent to participants and placed in the project database. Throughout all public processes, the two questions Issues Management routinely asks are, "Is any person or group missing?" and "Have we forgotten anything?"

Step 4: Issue Retirement

When a project is complete, Issues Management "retires" the issue, but it doesn't rest in peace.

"We keep information on each of the issues, because it provides a historical benefit," Mills said. "We ask, will the issue resurface, what stage is the issue in, and were we effective in managing [and] mitigating it?"

When reviewing Issues Management practices, Mills said that it's more like fire prevention than firefighting. Things to avoid include

- ignoring employees,
- getting too close to the involved public (losing objectivity),
- waiting too long to start,
- having unclear goals or purpose,
- having insufficient management commitment,
- having insufficient flexibility to respond,
- not providing timely updates,
- not including everybody (internal),
- not including everybody (external),
- not clarifying the relationship to decisions,
- not providing enough time,
- coming up with the answer too early, and
- lacking governing board support.

President of CONO for 6 years, Doran said it's never too early to engage stakeholders in any process: "It's all about process, and getting the right information, and not being sold a bill of goods. It's imperative to bring the negative into the communications, as well as the positive."

"If you're a public or municipal agency, the bottom line is that you're ratepayer dollars," she said. "Public process brings out the best in people even during the worst of times."

Gail Connors is an issues manager at Colorado Springs (Colo.) Utilities.