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COMMUNITY RELATIONS – AT THE HEART OF TRENCHLESS TECHNOLOGY PLANNING AND DELIVERY

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ABSTRACT:

The motivation for the development of the Trenchless Technology industry has been the need for installation, maintenance or renewal of deteriorated underground assets with minimal impact on the community.

That aim is critical, as the assets most in need of attention tend to be in the oldest and most densely populated parts of a city. They are in areas where excavation to install or replace a pipeline would be prohibitively expensive or unacceptably disruptive.

After 30 or so years, the Trenchless Technology industry continues to develop ingenious innovations to deliver underground structure renewal solutions by minimally invasive means. But as the industry matures and as contractors become more experienced, Authority expectations are increasing that the work will be undertaken while maintaining good relations with their customers – the surrounding community.

This paper addresses the approach to community relations and stakeholder engagement taken by Sydney Water, Australia's largest water utility, how that approach is implemented by a major Trenchless Technology contractor and how results are monitored and measured.

It details how community relations has moved from being a sideline to a Trenchless Technology program, to being at the heart of how a program is conceived, planned and delivered.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sydney Water provides safe drinking water to almost five million people across Sydney, the Blue Mountains and the Illawarra. They also look after wastewater and some stormwater services to help protect the health of Sydney's rivers and beaches.

Putting customers at the heart of everything has been recognised as one of the key strategic objectives for Sydney Water. Contributing to the need for this objective is the fact that the external environment is changing. It is the "Era of the Customer."

Digital innovations like smartphones, social media and easy access to Wi-Fi have made the community more informed, connected and environmentally aware than ever before.

Customers' experience with other service providers builds their expectations of how Sydney Water should engage with them.

Like Water Authorities and Councils throughout Australia and New Zealand, Sydney Water has ongoing annual programs for repair and renewal of water and sewer pipelines and associated infrastructure. Interflow is one of Sydney Water's delivery Contractors providing these services.

Trenchless Technology is preferred where possible for these works because they are most often needed in older built up areas, working around busy streets, houses, industrial sites, footpaths, parks and reserves. In many cases the work is only feasible because Trenchless Technology limits the amount of excavation necessary.

But some community disruption is inevitable.

While lining of sewer mains and repair of maintenance holes can be done working from existing access points, the need to locate large vehicles in narrow streets and operate equipment adjacent to houses can cause inconvenience. The problem is compounded if the access point is on private property.

Installation and operation of a flow bypass system can cause safety, odour and access issues with pipework lying above ground in a built-up area.



Picture 1: Backyard access is often necessary

Pipebursting to replace existing water mains limits the need for excavation, compared to replacement by trenching. But some excavation is still needed, so a project needs to be planned to limit the consequences to the community.

Sometimes excavation is required to replace maintenance holes or to carry out local repairs where, for example, a pipe has collapsed. This can cause inevitable disruption, raising issues about how community inconvenience should be managed.

Experience has shown that a community is more tolerant to the inconvenience if they are fully informed of the need for the works, are made aware of how they will be affected, how they can communicate concerns and know the duration of the works.

Sydney Water, requires communications and community relations to be effectively managed and delivered by the contractor, with the understanding that everything the contractor does reflects on Sydney Water's image and reputation. A key community relations outcome is to protect the image and reputation with stakeholders and the community through effective delivery of a successful project. There is every possibility that Sydney Water will return to the site at some stage in the future, so it is important to ensure a positive image is left with stakeholders and the local community at the completion of this work.

These days the delivery contractor is required to carry out all community relations activities in line with Sydney Water's community relations' protocols, policies and leading practice.

2. COMMUNITY RELATIONS PLANNING

On Sydney Water contracts the delivery contractor is now seen as representing Sydney Water and must work closely with stakeholders and local residents to keep them informed, proactively identify and manage potential issues, and deal with daily enquiries and concerns.

It requires a qualified and experienced community relations person to manage customer relations within the contractor's project management team. An external consultant can be employed when a contractor's staff do not have the required expertise.

The contractor's Community Relations Representative needs to ensure that the contractor is a suitable "face" of Sydney Water and must be the main point of contact for stakeholders and residents. They must be able to proactively identify community relations issues, bring them to Sydney Water's attention and resolve them. They will also manage the day-to-day activities such as dealing with stakeholder and customer enquiries, notifications, and complaints or issues.

At the same time, Sydney Water appoints its own Community Relations Advisor to act in a consultative and approval role.



Picture 2: Road obstruction can be minimised with careful vehicle placement



Prior to work commencing, the contractor needs to develop a project Community and Stakeholder Engagement Plan to address issues specific to the work program, and outline how they plan to work within the regulations imposed by government bodies. For sites assessed as being high risk, a specific Plan is required detailing all identified stakeholders, impacts and mitigation measures proposed.

The Contractor's Plan will incorporate key elements from the Sydney Water community and stakeholder strategy and demonstrate how stakeholder and community relations will be effectively implemented and delivered. The Contractor's Plan needs to be approved by Sydney Water's Community Relations Advisor before the start of any work or possession of a site.

The Plan needs to address:

- a process for identifying areas and work practices that pose a community relations risk
- the strategies that will be implemented to deal with this risk
- who the directly and indirectly affected customers and stakeholders are
- how these customers, stakeholders and the general community will be affected by the work

Typical community relations issues that arise through Trenchless Technology projects include:

- noise
- extended continuous shifts, including night work
- dust and odour
- visual impacts
- increase in traffic (truck movements)
- impact on traffic flow, parking and public space

The degree to which these issues impact on a work site include:

- access limitations
- road closures, traffic diversions
- proximity to sensitive locations such as schools, hospitals, bushland etc
- special needs of directly affected customers

The Plan needs to identify the affected stakeholders who will be impacted by the works. These can include:

- Individual residents and landholders
- Local Councils, State Government Members
- Services agencies – buses, light rail, police, ambulance, fire brigade
- Government departments such as the Road Authority, Environmental Protection Authority, National Parks and Wildlife Service etc.

The Plan needs to identify the tools that will be used and their proposed timing to communicate messages to the stakeholders and to retrieve their feedback where required. Tools typically available include:

- Advertising, signage, public display boards
- Meetings, site visits, public forums, information sessions
- Calling cards – to be distributed individually
- Doorknocks and notifications

- Community information line – to provide an accessible point of contact for inquiries and complaints
- Thank you letters.



The Community and Stakeholder Engagement Plan prepared by the Contractor needs to be approved by Sydney Water and put into practice prior to work on site commencing. All crew to be working on site must first be inducted into the Plan and made aware of community relations and protocols.

Picture 3: Continuity of water supply to householders is essential

3. IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

3.1 Work Logistics

The community and stakeholder management process begins some 4 to 5 weeks before work commences on site. During this period there are notifications to all impacted residents and stakeholders, and detailed communication and consultation with higher impacted residents and stakeholders.

During this period the project team will tweak the work schedule and methodology based on feedback from the community notification and planning period. Work schedules may be adjusted depending on such factors as school holidays, residents working night shift, bus timetables etc. Community feedback is taken into consideration in areas such as the location of work compounds and the type of equipment used. The social impacts must be balance against other factors such as environment and economic issues.

3.2 Home Plans

Special consideration must be made for those most affected by the works – householders where work will be carried out on their private property.

For each of these persons, a specific Home Plan is prepared which must be agreed and signed off by the householder, contractor and Sydney Water.

Preparation of a Home Plan starts with the Contractor's community relations representative visiting the site, ideally with the property owner, to identify any issues that the property owner may have or which may arise during works on their property.



The Home Plan details:

- contact details of the property owner and tenant
- names and numbers of Sydney Water's community relations advisor, the Contractor's community relations representative and the Contractor's project manager
- works to be undertaken, including working hours and potential impacts
- any special considerations for the work area such as pets that need to be secured, children who will be present on the property,
- pre-construction photos
- details of site restoration commitments
- if required, a copy of the Notice Of Entry for the property.

When works at the property are completed and the site has been restored by the contractor, the Contractor's Community Relations Representative meets with the owner/ tenant to confirm that the site has been restored as agreed.

3.3 Communications

Timely and effective communication is vital to the perceptions of a community who will be temporarily inconvenienced by the works.

The key messages to be communicated are the reasons for the work and benefits it will bring, the timing of the works, the likely impacts and details of how to contact the Contractor's Community Relations Representative with an inquiry or a complaint. Compliments for good work are also encouraged.

Communications need to provide reassurance that:

- Sydney Water and its contractor will make every effort to reduce the impact of the work on the community – particularly on residents and businesses directly affected
- Traffic and pedestrian control is in place to ensure works can be done safely
- The timetable for direct communication with Sydney Water's customers and stakeholders directly affected by the works is typically:
 - A 28-day program introduction notification including details of how to access a community relations representatives
 - 7 day detailed notification letters, and, if appropriate, a door knock before work starts
 - If night work is required, receive a notification letter via a door knock at least 7 days before the work starts
- The opportunity to attend a community information event will be offered if appropriate
- Resident will receive a thank you letter (includes a return mail customer survey) when work is finished.

The distribution area for the above communications is typically a minimum of 100m from the outer edges of the work area for day work, and 150 metres for night work.

4. MONITORING AND MEASURING COMMUNITY RELATIONS EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of the community relations delivery by the contractor is monitored and measured in several ways including:

- Project update meetings (monthly or fortnightly for high risk projects) to review effectiveness of community relations related initiatives
- Monthly reporting of a “reputation index” compiled using the status of community relations measurements such as enquiries, compliments, complaints, ombudsman or ministerial issues, notifications and inductions
- Compliance inspections of systems, procedures and work sites to confirm that the community relations plan is understood and is being suitably implemented



Chart 1: Regular measurements are taken to monitor the success of community relations initiatives

5. DEVELOPMENTS THAT HAVE IMPROVED OUTCOMES

Interflow, as one of Sydney Water’s delivery contractors, has responded to the Sydney Water “Customer at the Heart” philosophy and approach to community relations with development that has improved delivery management of projects and programs.

In September 2016 Interflow employed a qualified and experienced Community Relations Manager to focus the operational areas of their organisation into community and stakeholder management as an essential part of their program delivery. Up until then a 3rd party provider was being used to provide community relations management in line with Sydney Water’s requirements. Unlike quality, safety and environment management, community relations was then not seen as a core part of the project. To many in Interflow’s Sydney operations area, “comms” was seconded to someone else and wasn’t their responsibility. While the majority of community and stakeholders were satisfied with project delivery work that impacted them, there was still potential for improvement.



The Interflow Community Relations Manager, supported by a Community Relations Officer who was identified from within Interflow as having the right skill mix, became the Sydney water community representatives for all delivery management performed by the Company. This concentration of resources resulted in an almost immediate improvement in community relations outcomes.

The aim of the new arrangement was to implement a change in culture to bring community relations to the forefront of the thinking of Interflow's Project Managers and Project Engineers. It had to have the same essential importance as safety and environment management when planning and delivering projects.

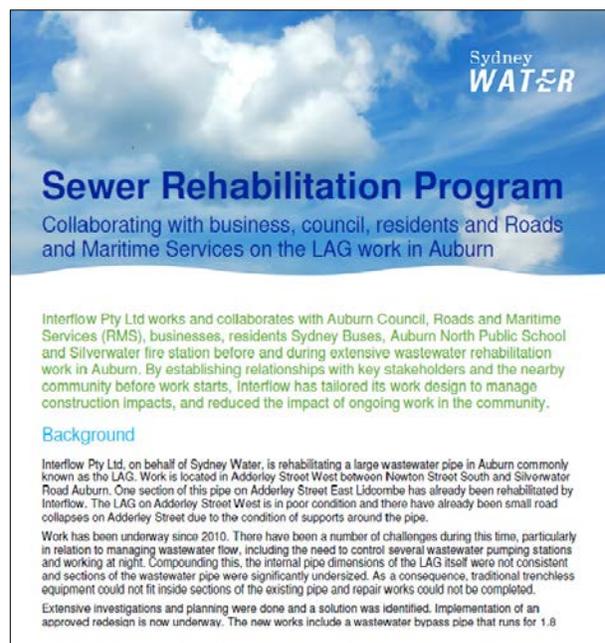
Customer home plans were already being used for work on private property but weren't proving as effective as they should be.

The Community Relations Manager began involving the on-site Project Managers and Project Engineers in the community and stakeholder project planning process. During early project meetings, aerial images were beamed onto screens showing the work areas in relation to the community. The Community Relations Manager shared experiences of how work of this type impacted on the type of customers around the work site. Community risks were being spoken about along with risk mitigation measures, all before a work crew, plant and equipment were anywhere near the work site.

Project Engineers / Managers started to become involved in the customer Home Plan process while doing their reconnaissance of work sites. Combined with the community representative the Home Plan process became a key project planning tool for them. Customers and Stakeholders were now being fully briefed on the upcoming work, and were consulting with Interflow on how the work would be done to mitigate any risks identified and concerns they had. This forced the engineers to start thinking about different ways to perform the work to mitigate impacts on the community.

Home Plans and community reconnaissance became a key project planning tool. Supporting the community relations team, the engineers were also on site learning about the customer while assessing the work area. Proactive planning was occurring and jobs were being delivered with less impact on the community. Compliments started to flow from the community and Sydney Water.

Trenchless technology was already a key aspect of the Interflow business and supported a much lesser impact on the customer and stakeholder property. The engineers now look at the suite of trenchless technologies available to them along with plant and equipment when planning projects.



Picture 4: Case study produced by Sydney Water highlighting community relations initiatives



The Sydney Water delivery management of contracts continues to improve as engineers continue to learn about the customer early and plan accordingly.

6. CONCLUSIONS

While Trenchless Technology exists because of the need for installation, maintenance and rehabilitation of deteriorated underground infrastructure using methods that minimise excavation, expectations are increasing that the works will be carried out without community inconvenience.

Community relations is now moving to the mainstream of consideration when Trenchless Technology projects are planned and undertaken. It is no longer satisfactory to consider it as an incidental requirement when compared to quality, safety and environment management.

Sydney Water has developed a community relations strategy, which tasks the Delivery Contractor with the responsibility of protecting and enhancing its reputation and image. Communications and relationships with the community are now monitored and measured. This provides an important contribution to the consideration of a contractor's performance on a contract.

Placing community relations at the heart of Trenchless Technology planning and delivery has seen measurable improvements in the reputation of the industry. It is an important step to enhance its acceptance as growth continues.