

International Association for Public Participation Core Values Award – Organization of the Year Application

Since its formation in 1991, the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) has actively engaged the public in its decision making processes. For the SNWA, public participation means more than simply paying “lip service;” it means developing processes where citizens and stakeholders can participate in a meaningful way. Over the last 17 years, we have established eight such public processes. Some of which were designed to address specific, time-sensitive issues such as drought, while others – like the Advisory Committee for Groundwater Management and the Youth Advisory Council – are ongoing processes, allowing for long-term public involvement.

While the SNWA has a long track record of public engagement, it is the concrete and tangible results of these efforts that are the true measure of our success. Our commitment extends beyond the duration of the committee, as evidenced by the continued influence of past recommendations on SNWA actions today. We submit this nomination to the International Association of Public Participation with these results in mind and with the firm belief that the best decisions are made when the public is involved in the decision-making processes.

Background

The Colorado River is the lifeblood for an urbanized West that few dreamed possible a century ago. This new West is still growing; meanwhile its resources are being tested by severe drought. Meeting water demands in such an environment is a daunting challenge that requires innovation and a willingness to step beyond old approaches. Along the Colorado River, there is one place that underscores most dramatically the challenges facing the western United States, as well as the solutions that are leading the way to a sustainable, long-term future for local communities. That place is Southern Nevada.

The SNWA is an innovative partnership among seven local water and wastewater agencies. Its mission is to manage the region’s water resources and develop solutions that will ensure adequate future water supplies for the Las Vegas Valley. This is no small task in a community that has doubled in population in just over 10 years. Today, the region boasts nearly two million residents; much of this growth has occurred during a period of historic drought on the Colorado River that has drained reservoirs, which provide over 90 percent of the region’s water supply, to levels never before experienced.

Southern Nevada is comprised of diverse stakeholder groups, each with different needs and often competing interests. Providing safe and reliable water service in such an environment has required the SNWA to make difficult decisions regarding water quality; infrastructure; financing; water resource development, management and conservation; and environmental stewardship. Engaging the public in meaningful dialogue and providing a forum for participation has allowed the community to reach consensus-based recommendations that serve as a foundation for major SNWA policy initiatives.

Results Based Interactions

Uninformed decision making can have serious consequences including project delays, cost and the erosion of public trust. To this end, the SNWA invests the up-front commitment necessary to ensure that public engagement is successful and the outcomes can be acted upon. This involves providing sufficient time to educate the public on the often interrelated issues of the industry, and allowing for discussion, deliberation and consensus building. It also means bringing all affected stakeholders to the process. Doing so ensures that decisions account for the voice of the community as a whole and do not exclude important minority views that are necessary to help balance the needs of our diverse community. While the process can move slowly at times, the value of participation outweighs these drawbacks.

The following section provides a brief overview of the eight major public and stakeholder processes undertaken by the SNWA. For brevity, we have included only a sample of major recommendations offered by these processes. A heading titled “Results” follows each major process to help illustrate how participation has influenced our decision-making processes this year.

Integrated Resource Planning Advisory Committee (IRPAC), 1994 – 1998

The SNWA formed this committee to develop recommendations on future water resources and funding for new regional facilities.

Key Recommendations

- Construct additional infrastructure on an as-needed basis to avoid overbuilding.
- Implement ozonation and direct filtration treatment at planned and existing treatment facilities.
- Pursue sales tax and a reliability surcharge to increase revenue stability and fund diversity.
- Pursue conservation as a critical and cost-effective resource.

Results

The SNWA has constructed major water facilities as demands required including a second water treatment plant, raw water intake and major pumping facilities. Both water treatment facilities are equipped with ozonation and direct filtration water treatment processes to protect and enhance regional water quality. Acting on the advice of the advisory committee, the SNWA successfully constructed “just in time” facilities, which reduced the financial obligation of existing residents and helped to ensure that facilities were not built in excess of customer demand. To help offset capital improvement costs, the SNWA implemented a reliability surcharge, increased connection charges and worked with the Nevada Legislature to impose a quarter-cent sales tax to fund the \$2.8 billion project. In addition, SNWA pursued and received a portion of proceeds from the sale of public lands in Southern Nevada to further offset costs. This diverse revenue stream continues to provide stability, even during today’s difficult economic conditions. Work on a third intake deep in Lake Mead demonstrates that the SNWA continues to be guided by the IRPAC recommendations to construct additional infrastructure on an as-needed basis.

One of the most measurable results of the IRPAC process is the success of SNWA’s water conservation program. As discussed below, the SNWA – and later advisory committee processes – have continued to build upon this recommendation. As a result of this specific process, the SNWA achieved the recommended goal of 25 percent conservation by 2010 – four years ahead of schedule, and continues to set more aggressive goals.

Citizens Advisory Committee on Groundwater Management, 1996 – 1997

This process was formed to develop recommendations on the management of groundwater within the over-appropriated Las Vegas Valley.

Key Recommendations

- Work with legislature to establish a Groundwater Management Program to provide oversight to management activities.
- Comprehensive, phased Groundwater Management Program is intended to meet additional recommendations for education, conservation, aquifer protection and groundwater management.
- A fee assessed by the Groundwater Management Program should fund programs/outreach.

Results

In 1997, the SNWA supported legislation to establish the formation of a Groundwater Management Program, including an advisory committee on groundwater management. Once the law was enacted, the SNWA implemented the program and advisory committee that oversaw the development of a well conversion program, completed a comprehensive inventory of wells in the valley and implemented extensive groundwater education and conservation efforts. These efforts were recognized through a special citation by the IAP2 in 1998.

Advisory Committee for Groundwater Management, 1997 – Present

This committee was formed as a result of the legislative action initiated by the CAC on Groundwater Management (above). This ongoing 9-member committee was tasked to oversee the SNWA’s actions to provide education and to protect, manage, and conserve groundwater resources of the Las Vegas Valley.

Key Recommendations

- Develop an artificial recharge program and aquifer protection plan.
- Implement a well conversion grant program and well plugging/abandonment program for well users in the Las Vegas Valley.

Results

The SNWA has developed and implemented the largest direct-injection artificial recharge program in the nation. To date over 9,000 acre-feet of water has been stored in the Las Vegas Valley Groundwater Basin as permanent

recharge to protect the aquifer. In addition, the SNWA provides financial assistance to help individuals with revocable permits connect to the municipal water system. With proceeds collected through the Groundwater Management Program fee, the SNWA funds 85 percent of the costs to extend (up to 180 feet) water service to a customer's property (offsite costs), 100 percent of the well plugging and abandonment process, and \$500 toward costs related to the water service connection at the customer's property (onsite costs). To date the SNWA has helped fund over 423 conversions and plugged and abandoned 260 wells. The Advisory Committee continues to provide input on groundwater issues, recommending in January that a program be implemented to provide rebates to well owners who wish to install a submeter to measure their groundwater use.

Water Quality Citizens Advisory Committee, 1997 – 1998

The SNWA took the lead within the community in convening this committee to address water quality issues as they relate to the Las Vegas Wash, Las Vegas Bay and Lake Mead.

Key Recommendation

- Development of a Comprehensive Management Plan to address major water quality and environmental concerns in the Las Vegas Wash and Lake Mead.

Results

In 1997, local, state and federal entities recognized that increased wastewater flows were creating significant issues of erosion and pollution in the Las Vegas Wash. The SNWA took the lead in addressing these issues by forming the Water Quality Citizens Advisory Committee (WQCAC). The WQCAC made nine major recommendations, including a recommendation to create a comprehensive management plan by an interagency and community-wide effort. The SNWA, subsequently convened the Las Vegas Wash Coordination Committee to develop this plan and oversee actions to address the remaining WQCAC recommendations.

Las Vegas Wash Coordination Committee, 1998 – Present

The Las Vegas Wash Coordination Committee (LVWCC) is comprised of local, state and federal agencies, business owners and members of the public. The group formed nine task groups to review the issues and work together to develop a Comprehensive Adaptive Management Plan for the Las Vegas Wash and recommended activities to restore its ecological functions.

Key Recommendations

- Reduce flows in the Las Vegas Wash through reuse and conservation.
- Rehabilitate the ecological function of the Las Vegas Wash through revegetation, construction of flow-control weirs and redevelop wetland habitats.
- Develop a program to regularly perform water quality and biological monitoring.

Results

Since 1998, the SNWA has constructed 10 erosion control structures (reducing total suspended solids by more than 50 percent), stabilized more than 5.5 miles of bank, revegetated more than 175 acres of wetland, removed more than 200 acres of invasive species, implemented extensive wildlife inventories, implemented comprehensive water quality monitoring programs and participated in numerous public outreach and education events. The LVWCC continues to meet quarterly to address operational issues related to the management of the Las Vegas Wash.

Youth Advisory Council, 1999 – Present

This council provides opportunities for youth to participate in the ongoing planning, policy development, and evaluation of water conservation. This council is made up of local high school students that develop and implement water-related projects each year and make formal recommendations to the SNWA Board of Directors.

Key Recommendations

- Develop a Water Smart Home program to certify new homes and neighborhoods as water smart.
- Various conservation-based projects within the community

Results

The SNWA launched the nation's largest new home water efficiency program, Water Smart Home. To date, 7,000 water smart homes have been constructed and certified under this program. The council has helped the SNWA to serve the community in other projects such as creating a xeriscape demonstration garden at an Elementary school, developing a recycling program for valley high schools and, earlier this year, hosting the first World Water Day event in Southern Nevada.

Drought Citizens Advisory Committee, 2003

This committee was convened to provide input into the SNWA's draft Drought Plan and conservation strategic planning process.

Key Recommendations

- Measures targeted to achieve additional conservation of outdoor water use to extend existing Colorado River resources.

SNWA Results

Severe drought struck the Colorado River in the early part of this century. Following Colorado River flows of 25 percent of normal in 2002, the SNWA member agencies were required to act quickly to draft a Drought Plan (Plan) outlining specific measures to reduce local water demands. Although it was necessary to implement the Plan immediately, consideration for public involvement in issues impacting its customers remained a priority for SNWA. In January 2003, the SNWA Board of Directors adopted the Plan and appointed the Drought Citizens Advisory Committee to provide input and make recommendations to further develop and refine the Plan.

Consistent with the committee's direction, the SNWA enhanced its comprehensive conservation programs with a focus on outdoor water use. As a measure of success, Southern Nevadans have consumed 15 billion gallons less water in 2007 than in 2002, despite the addition of 400,000 new residents during that span and more than 40 million annual visitors.

Integrated Water Planning Advisory Committee, 2004 – 2005

The SNWA convened this committee to develop recommendations on how best to integrate in-state resources into its existing water resource portfolio. Committee membership included representatives from the rural Nevada counties as well as various Southern Nevada stakeholders. The committee proceedings were simulcast to seven rural locations to allow for attendance by those in the rural communities.

Key Recommendations

- Pursue additional conservation to achieve 250 GPCD by 2010 and 245 GPCD by 2035.
- Provide additional safeguards for communities and the environment in areas where in-state groundwater resources are developed.
- Work with the Colorado River Basin States to implement full-consumptive use for in-state, non-Colorado River resources and additional flexibility for Colorado River resources.

SNWA Results

To achieve the new regional conservation goals recommended by the committee, the SNWA increased incentives to encourage participation in its successful Water Smart Landscape program. The change prompted the conversion of more than 13 million square-feet of landscaping under this program. Due to the success of this and other efforts, the community is on-track to achieve the established conservation goals as early as this year. As a result, technical staff from the SNWA member agencies are working to define a new conservation goal consistent with a committee recommendation to pursue additional conservation if possible.

To ensure the protection of the environment in rural Nevada, the SNWA has conducted hydrologic, biological and other environmental research in the region and entered into stipulated agreements with federal and local agencies to develop a Biologic Monitoring, Management and Mitigation Plan in the area. The SNWA also acquired several ranch properties in Spring Valley, along with the associated surface water rights, to help protect the wildlife and aesthetic values and to support the basin's natural recharge. To support the full use of Colorado River resources,

the SNWA successfully negotiated with other Basin States during a time of drought to increase its flexibility on the Colorado River, culminating in the signing of a Record of Decision by the Secretary of the Interior in December 2007. In spite of historical precedence, the SNWA will be able to withdraw some Virgin and Muddy River resources as Colorado River credits through its existing infrastructure at Lake Mead. The SNWA will also receive Colorado River credits for any in-state groundwater resources returned to Lake Mead as waste water, extending the in-state resource by approximately 70 percent.

Application of Core Values

The SNWA embraces each of the IAP2 Core Values. The following section describes how the agency's efforts work to implement these values.

SNWA public participation and stakeholder processes are designed to engage diverse stakeholders to ensure the voice of the community as a whole is heard. Committees typically include representation from the following stakeholder groups: local residents, large and small businesses, gaming, seniors, environmental interests, financial interests, developers and stakeholders outside of the Las Vegas area as applicable.

SNWA public participation processes are facilitated, consensus based processes. Facilitation is used to help ensure the needs and interests of all participants are well understood and reflected in process reports. As part of the process, participants are provided an overview of goals and expectations and provided with a sense of how their recommendations will influence the organization's actions. Following this orientation, participants receive extensive education regarding the complexities of issues and perspectives relating to the committee's purpose. Following the conclusion of the public process, recommendations are presented to the SNWA Board of Directors for action. The SNWA's track record for implementing process recommendations is well demonstrated in the proceeding narrative. Additionally, the result of SNWA public involvement is widely evident in key agency documents. Principal examples of how the public has informed decision-making includes the SNWA Drought Plan, SNWA Water Resource Plan, Strategic Plan, SNWA website (www.snwa.com) and SNWA board actions.

Conclusion

Public Participation shapes nearly every policy decision considered by the SNWA. Even though some of these processes concluded several years ago, the recommendations and policy direction continues to guide the SNWA today. The numbers of citizens processes, and the diversity of process missions, demonstrate the SNWA's continued and substantial commitment to public participation. The SNWA continues to act on the recommendations received from its numerous public processes. This can be observed in every major area of the SNWA's efforts: reducing water use by billions of gallons despite continued growth, fulfilling commitments to improve and safeguard the environment within and outside the Las Vegas Valley, continually pursuing innovative management to extend Colorado River resources and constructing multi-billion dollar infrastructure projects just-in-time and under budget.

This ongoing commitment, not only to involve the public – but to execute the recommendations they provide – demonstrates SNWA's dedication to the Core Values of public participation. These tangible results are the evidence that demonstrate the SNWA is qualified and deserving to receive recognition as an IAP2 Core Values, Organization of the Year.

References

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- Lewis has served as facilitator for a majority of the SNWA's public processes.
- Richard Bunker is the former Chair of the Colorado River Commission and served on the IRPAC, Drought CAC and IWPAC.