

Public Involvement in the Siting of Large Scale Hog Facilities: Lessons for Pork Producers from Four Alberta Communities¹

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▪ Introduction

The recent increase in intensive hog production in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba has corresponded with increased hostility and legal challenges within rural agricultural communities over the siting of intensive hog facilities. Long, expensive appeals to siting decisions suggest the need for public involvement in intensive livestock management. In 1998, Serecon Management Consulting Inc. prepared an assessment of the socio-economic impact of hogs in Alberta. Their conclusions, recommended that pork producers strike a balance between the science-based aspects of their plan and good neighbour policies, including communication with surrounding neighbours, public awareness and solid environmental planning (Serecon, 1998). Our research focuses on the public involvement in the siting of intensive hog developments in Alberta, the reasons for conflict, and the ways to minimise conflict through constructive public participation methods.

The purpose of this project was to identify, through perceptions of the stakeholders and academic literature, how public involvement initiatives can reduce unnecessary community conflict, foster informed choices and make the process more effective for all interested parties. The results of this research will be useful to all parties to avoid expensive delays, escalation of municipal and legal conflict, and to increase community democratic decision-making.

The overall research approach involved 43 in-depth interviews, using a pre-tested survey questionnaire, with key stakeholders who were well-informed

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and/or involved in the public participation processes of siting intensive hog operations. The interviews are supplemented with review and analysis of written materials including government documents, media articles, current and proposed livestock siting policy, and academic literature. The various stakeholder groups in the sampling frame included provincial government staff (Alberta Agriculture, Food & Rural Development, Capital Region Health Authority and Alberta Environment), municipal government (county reeves, county councillors, development officers and members of the subdivision and development appeal board), the involved community residents (appellants to proposed developments and neighbours to existing and proposed facilities who did not appeal the development), pork producers, and liaisons (lawyers and consultants employed by provincial government, municipal government, pork producers and the involved community residents).

The cases for this research included four agricultural communities in Alberta that are similar in terms of type and size of operations (minimum 1200 sow operation), but vary in the decision-making process, and the outcome of the process. The communities chosen are similar in socio-economic demographics: they are agriculturally based economies, have not experienced major in- or out-migration, and are similar in terms of population size and distribution of income. Two of the communities were chosen because they experienced conflict and appeals with proposed intensive hog operations but they varied on the decision outcome at the local appeal process. The third community was chosen because it experienced no conflict over the siting of several intensive hog barns. The final community was chosen as it has had extensive experience in siting intensive livestock operations with and without conflict. By comparing four land-use planning processes that are used to site intensive hog operations in Alberta, we identified patterns across the various settings.

This paper illustrates the comparison of stakeholders' perceptions of public participation for siting intensive hog operations. The tables below introduce the perceived problems and solutions identified by the four stakeholder groups (government, pork producers, involved community residents and liaisons). This paper describes the perceived problems with the public participation process, perceived problems with the appeal process, and perceived solutions for public participation. Following the comparison of stakeholders' perceptions is a discussion of the implications of this research for pork producers.

▪ **Problems with Public Participation**

Process Not Understood:

Provincial government respondents reported that the public participation process is not understood by the public, pork producers, or municipal

government, and lacks consistency among rural municipalities, leading to confusion and frustration among all stakeholders (Table 1).

Table 1. Perceived problems with public participation.

Problems With Public Participation	Government	Pork Producers	Involved Community Residents	Liaisons
Process Not Understood	✓			
Early Consultation		✓		

Early Consultation:

The pork producers report that early consultations are not beneficial for pork producers as they give information to community residents who then take this information and use it against them at an appeal. Given that the permitting process is not well understood, and development plan information can be used against pork producers, there is a reluctance among pork producers to use public participation early in the decision-making process.

▪ **Problems with the Appeal Process**

Table 2. Perceived problems with the appeal process.

Problems with the Appeal Process	Government	Pork Producers	Involved Community Residents	Liaisons
Emotional Content	✓	✓	✓	
Cost is Too High	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community Polarization	✓	✓	✓	✓
Too Accessible	✓	✓		
Decision Maker Incompetence		✓		
Mistrust			✓	

Emotional Content:

Government, pork producer and involved community resident respondents, that were involved in an appeal, reported that the emotional testimonies at the appeal did not foster conflict resolution, but rather polarized the groups involved in the issue.

Cost:

The majority of stakeholders reported that the cost of an appeal is exorbitant, and can include lawyer fees, consultant fees, per diems, travelling, and long distance phone calls. A large proportion of the cost consists of the developers' time to delay a project and community members' time to do research related to the development. These findings suggest that an appeal process is both emotionally and personally costly for all groups involved.

Community Polarization:

All stakeholder groups mentioned the disruptive effects of the adversarial nature of appeals. Disruptive effects included loss of friendships, children's negative relationships at school as a result of their parents' positions in the conflict, and increases in tensions between neighbours.

Process is Too Accessible:

The majority of government and pork producer respondents reported that the appeal process is too accessible given the low cost to appellants, and unlimited access to appeals for non-substantive, "frivolous" reasons.

Decision-Maker Incompetence:

The pork producer respondents reported technical debates at a municipal appeal process are problematic due to the incompetence of the decision-makers, inaccurate accessible information available at appeals, and the selective use of science by local government officials to support their pre-held preferences about the proposed development.

Mistrust:

Involved community residents reported mistrust as a significant problem in the appeal process. They reported a lack of trust in the information provided by experts, government officials and pork producers. This mistrust was associated with the perceived lack of information government personnel and pork producers were willing to provide about the proposed hog facility development and site. Community residents also reported a perceived co-operative relationship between government officials and pork producers. The involved community resident respondents reported that the appeal process was often

intimidating, and in some cases, residents have reportedly received threatening phone calls to drop an appeal.

▪ **How to Improve Public Participation**

Table 3. Perceived solutions for public participation.

Solutions For Public Participation	Government	Pork Producers	Involved Community Residents	Liaisons
Third Party Neutral Information	✓	✓	✓	✓
Early Upfront Information	✓		✓	✓
Separate Technical from Land Use Issues	✓	✓		✓
Fee for Appeals	✓			
Education & Training	✓			
Development Plan	✓			
Open house	✓	✓		

Third Party Neutral Information:

One solution that was mentioned by all stakeholders was the need for third party neutral information. Pork producers mentioned that when they hire their own consultants, appellants claim that the consultant is biased in favour of the development. Respondents from the involved community residents, liaisons, and municipal government stated that provincial government officials are no longer third party neutral sources of information given their role in promoting the hog industry. One of the developers suggested paying a consulting fee for an environmental assessment as part of each application for a development permit. The rural municipality would then be in charge of hiring the consultant of their choice, with the public having input into the choice of consultants.

Upfront Information:

Early upfront information and community involvement was mentioned by government, involved community residents and liaisons as a solution that may help reduce the mistrust between stakeholders. Some examples of early

involvement include involving the community through informal meetings before purchasing land or making the final site selection. One developer, in one of our cases where there was no controversy around the siting of the new hog facility, met with all neighbours adjacent to the proposed facility, to review the facility plans and to negotiate any matters of concerns to the neighbours (e.g., traffic flow).

Consistency Across the Province:

Pork producers, municipal government and community resident respondents suggested that the provincial government needs to take a stronger role in developing clear rules and consistent standards of process for development permits. This would develop greater trust from the public as well as reduce confusion among pork producers as to the steps involved to meet the standards for the municipal government. Community residents reported that the development permit standards were inadequate, whereas the pork producers argued that the standards, or rules, were unclear and inconsistent. Government personnel concurred with both of these claims, emphasising the recent reforms to intensive livestock regulations and the need to standardise the permit rules and processes. The majority of respondents have suggested a greater provincial role in regulating and enforcing the intensive livestock industry. Provincial regulations coupled with a well-supported local development vision would provide an environment of greater trust.

Address Technical Issues Separately:

The government interviewees, pork producers and liaisons suggested the separation of technical issues from land use issues. Such separation is part of the proposed legislation that would provide for a provincial appeal board that would handle all technical issues.

Charge a Fee for Appeal :

The provincial government participants suggested that charging a fee for appeals would assist in the administrative cost, and would reduce the number of appeals they referred to as “frivolous”. Fees for appeals range from free to \$300 in the cases examined in this study. In contrast, liaison and community resident respondents reported that the process should be more accessible and that charging fees for an appeal reduces accessibility, and creates a deterrent to participate in an ostensibly democratic process.

Education and Training:

The provincial government respondents also mentioned education and training should be carried out at the rural municipality level to: 1) increase the understanding of the decision-making process, and 2) increase the competence of the district appeal board (DAB) members. These respondents suggested

that the municipalities should make greater efforts to educate the public about the decision making process on a regular basis. Suggestions for training included training DAB members on the technical aspects of intensive hog operations and alternative dispute resolution.

Development Vision:

Provincial government respondents also suggested that rural municipalities create a development vision. Through various public consultation methods, rural municipalities could develop plans for future land uses and designate land for specific developments. This solution incorporates public input much sooner into the decision-making process with much improved long term planning. Planning may help to reduce future conflicts if land use designations are already made.

Open Houses:

Both the provincial government and pork producers suggested open houses as useful public participation. Pork producers and government appear to be comfortable with open houses because they remain in control of the information presented, and this forum permits a free-flowing conversation between pork producers and members of the public. Opponents to the open house method, primarily community residents, argue that open houses generally occur too late in the decision-making process, provide only the information that the developer wants to present, and thereby does not allow authentic public input into the planning process.

■ Implications for the Industry

According to these findings, rural residents are demanding greater public involvement in hog facility siting decisions through the appeal process. Given that the appeal process is adversarial and information is used for or against the siting of the hog facility, rather than as a constructive set of facts to inform each party, information presented during the appeal is often not trusted by one or more of the parties involved. Rural residents feel betrayed when they perceive their concerns to be dismissed, their requests for studies on the impacts of the hog facility unheard, and especially when they perceive the government as unquestioningly promoting the siting of hog facilities, rather than acting as a neutral arbiter in the conflict.

Effective ways to regain public trust are to involve the public earlier in the decision-making process and increase available information about the proposed facility. The flow of information at open houses lacks continuous two-way information flow. Ideally, developers should hold several open houses in areas they are considering a hog facility. Such open houses should be held

during non-harvest times of the year, prior to the purchase of land, the finalisation of the business plan, and before the final siting decision, so that the input received from the community can truly be implemented into the business management plan.

The appeal stage is too late for meaningful negotiations to occur between pork producers and community residents. Local governments need to find alternative methods of dispute resolution that occur before the approval of intensive hog development permits. The *Decide-Announce-Defend* process is generally unsatisfactory to those concerned about the intensive hog industry. Citizen advisory committees are a method, which could precede permit approvals to incorporate early communication by gathering input from aware and generally well-connected community members. This type of public participation would also be useful for rural municipalities to develop a community development vision, zoning recommendations, etc. so there is more certainty around development plans for all stakeholders.

One option for municipalities is to develop a process to inform an established group of rural residents, such as a Citizen Advisory Committee, about the intensive hog operation application early in the process. The first step could be to send out information packages to determine local residents' interest in participating in a roundtable discussion. The process can be implemented by municipal planning staff who have received some training in facilitating such processes, or by hiring a neutral mediator. The additional cost of this mechanism could be incorporated into the fee for a development permit application. In order for these mechanisms to be trusted, there must be some sort of binding agreement that the decisions made in these meetings are binding, so that pork producers and other stakeholders are committed to the process and discussing alternatives and compromises.

A requirement for successful conflict resolution is that the stakeholders are focused on the same conflict issues. According to this study, the issues triggering conflict are framed very differently among the various stakeholder groups. If stakeholders are debating technical issues but seek changes on a more fundamental policy level, it is not likely the outcome will be successful by any stakeholders' standards. This study suggests that the policy of hog expansion that the provincial government departments have actively promoted is at the heart of the debate for involved community residents. Issues such as manure management, soil conservation and groundwater pollution may continue to be debated at appeals, however, the inclusion of public debate into policy issues guiding the directions of agricultural expansion needs to be examined.

▪ **References**

Serecon Management Consulting Inc. 1998. *Socio-Economic Impact of Hog Operations in Alberta*. Edmonton, Alberta.