

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE QUINSAM COAL PROJECT

by Mary Collins

Project Sketch

I appreciate the opportunity of speaking to you today about a project — the Quinsam Coal Project — on Vancouver Island, which is both exciting and unique. Particularly I look forward to sharing with you some of our experiences in public involvement in that project which were especially challenging, given the history and geography of the project. As Lanny Hubbard said, there is no magic formula to guarantee success, so I want to leave with you our ideas and cautions which may be helpful. Before proceeding with my discussion of the public involvement programs, let me first provide you with a very quick sketch of the project itself so that you have some context to refer to in assessing the work which we undertook to listen to and inform the public.

Quinsam Coal Limited is a joint project of Weldwood of Canada Ltd., well known in the forest industry in Canada and which holds the coal rights in the project area, and Brinco Limited, a Canadian resource development company who became managers of the Quinsam Coal project in the fall of 1981. The project area is about 27 kilometers from Campbell River on Vancouver Island — often referred to by local people as the "Salmon Fishing Capital of the World", near Middle Quinsam Lake and the Quinsam River, which downstream joins the Campbell River. There is a federal government-operated major fish hatchery on the Quinsam River near its mouth.

The mine proposal is to mine by surface mining methods about 900,000 tonnes of high quality thermal coal a year for a fifteen year period with reserves indicating a potential life of the mine for possibly another fifteen years beyond that. Capital costs to undertake a project of this size were estimated at \$100 million with operating costs in the order of

\$30 to \$35 million per year. The project would employ about 240 people when in full production, with income of \$12 to \$13 million annually projected for the Campbell River area from direct and indirect job income.

The coal would be shipped from the mine site by covered trucks using existing roads — a combination of on and off highway — to a port site at Middle Bay about nine kilometers north of Campbell River. The coal would there be loaded onto barges and taken to a major coal loading port along the west coast for shipment to markets, projected to be primarily in Pacific Rim countries.

History of the Project

Work on the project began in the early 1970's, and the first partners on the project were Weldwood and Luscar — a company well known for its coal mining activities in Alberta. Following the submission of a Stage I proposal in 1978, the Project undertook environmental evaluations and submitted its Stage II report in December 1980. The provincial Minister of Environment advised the company in May 1981 that further work was required before Stage II approval could be given, particularly on hydrology and the port site — which had initially been slated for the Tyee Spit in town and was the focus of heated controversy.

After Brinco joined the project, replacing Luscar as managers, a full review of all plans was undertaken, and potential problems identified. Certainly one of the most important of these was the almost solid public objection to the project in Campbell River, where there had been protests and demonstrations over the earlier plans for the project. Thus, hand in hand with developing the environmental programs required, the company agreed that a major focus of attention and effort must be placed on local!

concerns.

And that is where I came in. Having joined Brinco Ltd. as Director of Public Affairs in November of that year, I immediately became immersed in the Quinsam Project: originally as an advisor and helping to set up the programs, and then, from the spring of 1982 until last year, as basically a full-time resident in Campbell River, managing the program. I will fill in the details in a few moments, but just let me complete the history.

In August 1982, Quinsam submitted its Stage II Addendum (as it was called) to the provincial and federal governments which addressed all the environmental issues and incorporated a number of changes to the plans to make them both environmentally and publicly more acceptable. In February 1983, the provincial Minister of Environment — then Stephen Rogers — announced Stage II approval in principle for the project but advised that a public inquiry would be held under the Environmental Management Act at Stage III. The hearing was held in October 1983 and lasted for 21 days over a seven-week period, providing a full opportunity for all interested local and government agencies to present information, and for the company to present its experts and be subject to cross-examination under oath. The report from the Commission of Inquiry is expected in March of this year. The company can then proceed with further discussions on its permit applications with the appropriate government agencies, as the permits, which were submitted last June, but await the recommendations of the Commission before they can be approved.

Depending on the outcome of the above, and of course of market negotiations (which are being actively pursued by the company), the project can then move to construction and finally to production.

Let me return now to the public involvement process: outline the issues, the programs and some of the lessons learned.

Public Issues

The fear which was generated locally

about the Quinsam Coal project was nothing new for Campbell River. Many of the same people who led the protests against Quinsam Coal had also been against the initial Hydro development at John Hart Dam back in the fifties, against the building of the Crown Forest paper mill, and vociferously against the development of Westmin's mine in Strathcona Park some fifteen years ago. In fact, that was the example that was used most often by both hardcore and the public opponents. They felt they had been deceived by Westmin and that this would inevitably happen again with Quinsam, no matter what assurances the company might give.

Don't forget as well, that Campbell River sees itself as a fishing community; Roderick Haig Brown is the in-residence guru, and almost everyone fishes, with the prize being the big Tye. In actuality, the economy of the town and surrounding area with a population of about 30,000 is really forest-based, with tourism playing an important but seasonal role. But self-images are important, even if they are not accurate.

Opposition to the project originally appeared to have developed from individuals involved in the Campbell River Estuary and Watershed Society, but, as many of these people also ran the other fishing and environmental groups in town, they were quickly able to build up what appeared to be a large base of support. With several influential and outspoken persons on board and with the sympathy of the local press, they created an environment of total opposition and an environment where anyone who might support the project felt threatened or ostracized if he or she spoke out — which can often happen in a small town. This situation has grown over several years. However, when Luscar dropped out in Stage II, a lot of people thought the project would die. When Brinco announced its new involvement and plans to proceed on the project, all the anger and concern built up again, so when I first arrived into town (the fall, 1981), I felt like I was either right out of a scene from "High Noon" or I had some unacceptable social disease.

To give you an example: ordinarily one

expects that a local Chamber of Commerce will support a new industrial project which brings jobs and economic benefits to its members. Well, within a month of our arrival in December 1981, the issue of Quinsam Coal has burst forth within the Chamber, and the Executive decided to have a full public airing of the project for their general membership and take a vote. Well, that was some effort. Here we were, new in town, not yet knowing the people or having shown them we were concerned and interested, up against the community stalwarts, and with a showdown on our hands. I can remember going out and knocking on the doors of as many Chamber members as possible in the ten days before that meeting, trying (along with other members of our group) to identify and get out what support we thought we might have. We knew if we lost this one, we would have a near-impossible task to develop any credibility.

The night came. Here we were in a large hall, up on a large stage, facing several hundred sceptics, in a very formalized setting for our first direct interaction: a situation I would ordinarily want to avoid. After the presentations from both sides, there were questions and presentation of resolutions. Of course, there were attempts to get through negative resolutions, but with some skillful manoeuvring and some help from the friends we had, we finally received about two-thirds support for a resolution of support — qualified by requirements to meet environmental safeguards — as was always to be the case. Of course, even that was presented by the local press to be the views of the reactionary Chamber of Commerce, but at least it was a step in the right direction. And let me remind you that Quinsam Coal was in the papers almost daily over the next two-year period. In fact, if, when the paper day arrived and there was no new attack outlined by an opponent in the press, no letters to the editor, we were not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

But to summarize, the issues were: fear of the impact of the coal mine on water quality and fisheries resources, distrust of

both companies and government, and, among some of the old-timers, a desire to maintain the status quo and not have any new activities or new people in the town.

Public Programs

How did we approach this Goliath? Well, looking at it from a management analysis perspective, I can say the following.

Our objective was to obtain required approvals for the project to proceed under favourable and realistic conditions and to obtain these approvals in a timely and cost-efficient manner.

Our strategies with respect to obtaining public support for the project which we realized was essential in obtaining the political support from the provincial and federal governments were as follows:

1. Identify our audiences — environmentalists, businessmen, local politicians, blue collar workers, fishing interests, women, school children, external special interest groups, native people, media, etc.
2. Identify the concerns and interests of each of these groups. Obviously for local politicians, it is to get re-elected and to try to put forward what they perceive to be the dominant views of their supporters. In this case, it was not easy for some of them, as they realized that much of the community was concerned about jobs and economic growth, particularly as the recession deepened throughout 1982 and 1983, while the hard core opponents with their media support appeared to have more public support. What happened with some politicians is that they did a magnificent fence-sitting job and tried to keep everyone happy.
3. Identify those individuals and groups who formed the hard core opposition and attempt to minimize their circle of influence.
4. Identify areas of potential support and develop ways of building that support.
5. Identify specific technical issues of greatest concern and determine if changes can be made or work undertaken which will make them more acceptable to the community and government.

Really these strategies are very straightforward, the same as ones used in a political campaign or often within a bureaucracy or corporate environment to obtain support for a particular project or promotional effort. But they require developing and maintain an extensive intelligence network and obtaining as much information as possible from which to be able to sift out what may be relevant. And, of course, to anticipate and, where possible, head off opposition initiatives.

Having gone through this exercise, what were some of the activities we actually undertook? First of all, and most important, was opening a full-time store-front type office in Campbell River staffed by a local person — Dorothy Wilson (a longtime resident of Campbell River) — who became our most valuable resource. This office served many functions. It became, for many, a drop-in centre, a place people could come and get information and test out ideas, a centre for sharing information about what was going on. Remember, this is a small town, and it is important to know as much as possible about everything that is going on, not just things that relate to Quinsam Coal. It was a job information centre — and although we were soundly criticized by the opposition for soliciting support through the promise of jobs, this was not really accurate, as it was the public themselves who vigorously sought the opportunity of ensuring their names were on file, despite our repeated and persistent cautions that there was no assurance of jobs at this time. Nevertheless, that brought people in and put us in touch with people; it helped to break down the barriers between townspeople and the company, and they could see us as ordinary people. We were able to build up credibility which was absolutely vital to our success.

We had lots of visual aids and display materials about the project, slides, and videotapes. These were used for formal and informal presentations to all sorts of groups, from school children to environmentalists and visitors from all over the world.

We put on quite a number of more

formal events: technical workshops in which we brought up our consultants to talk with the public and answer questions, meetings, open houses, and then innumerable talks to organizations — as many as would listen, whether they were women's sororities, church groups, schools, service clubs, and on and on. Whether it was five or fifty, we were there.

Another program which was highly successful was our mine site tours. We held these frequently during the spring to fall season and attracted a large number of people who would ordinarily never come to a public meeting, but were indeed the focus of our attention — our potential supporters who needed something to convince them that we could do the job without harming the environment. These tours were informal, relaxed and allowed people to see things for themselves as well as hearing all about the project itself.

Other programs to reach the uncommitted were through media activities and our direct householder delivery of the Quinsam Update — a regular newsletter about the project and current activities. We had a very positive response to the Update and found many people kept up-to-date and were able to become informed without having to "go public", which with some people who worked in some environments such as the schools, was very difficult, as the majority of the school teachers tended to be opposed. Media involvement was continuous, and although we had to contend with a negative attitude on the part of certain reporters, we kept providing information and appeared on TV shows, organized some shows ourselves for the local station and did radio spots whenever possible as well.

Through all these efforts, and just "being around" — accessible, visible and polite (I can't stress enough how important that is) — we began to make inroads into public opinion, and it become acceptable to be supportive of the project. The final and most visible test of that came when a group of local citizens decided to form a group in support of the project which they called "FACTS" (Fish and Coal Together Safely). This was in the fall of 1982, and they decided

that positive voices needed to be heard in Victoria and Ottawa as the Stage II Addendum was being reviewed.

They got together in a group and did a door-to-door campaign to get people to sign a petition in support of the project, with the condition that environmental safeguards be maintained, and obtained over 1500 signatures. But what was different was that they also raised the money to pay for three full-page ads in the local newspapers in which they printed their endorsement, along with the names of those who supported them. Of course, the people had been told that their names would be published and were given the option of remaining anonymous, which very few did. Thus, for the first time, there was this tremendous body of public endorsement, which was critical and vital to us at that time. Certainly there were reprisals or attempted reprisals from the opponents, to be honest — but how can you boycott 1500 of your fellow citizens?

At one time during the history of the project, the Honourable Stephen Rogers (then Minister of Environment) had said in the legislature that he thought the majority of the public in Campbell River were against the project. This, in fact, was one of the statements that spurred on the FACTS group to undertake their activities as they felt so strongly that such was not the case, and they were effective in being able to base their claim on facts!

Certainly there were external events which helped our case — particularly the worsening economic conditions in general which meant that a lot of people were unemployed for the first time and were much more receptive to the idea of new industry — even a coal mine — than they would have been in good times. As well, however, the efforts of the public involvement program were critical in obtaining and maintaining that support and showing to the politicians that the project was acceptable.

Let me just add, as well, that in addition to the activities in Campbell River, we also had a parallel program going on with individuals and groups outside Campbell

River, for as we all know, it is often the external groups which make the most noise, and one needs to develop the same scientific approach in dealing with them. A lot of that involves one-on-one discussion and debate, appearances at meetings and public gatherings, and ensuring that such groups are receiving up-to-date information on the project.

I have not talked about the Public Inquiry last fall, as that was really another event all to itself. Let me say, however, while it provided an outlet for the opposition to voice their views and have a final say, there were also groups there in support of the project. As a result of the skillful job of our technical people, headed up by Tom Milner, and our lawyer, Peter Butler, in my view the hearings really turned out to be an advantage to the company as far as the general public was concerned, as the claims of the opposition were not supported in the evidence. The hearings were televised by the local station and shown in the evenings — in fact, have been shown again — and the feedback we received was extremely positive from the viewing public. We also were fortunate in that the provincial press paid no attention to the proceedings after the first day, as I think it was evident at that time that the issues were not of provincial importance.

The Lessons

Let me conclude then with a few lessons which I would pass on to you from this recent experience with Quinsam Coal. But I caution you again there is no magic formula: each situation must be looked at separately.

1. Start early on public involvement, the earlier the better, so you can gain an understanding of the people and try to avoid problems and plan a project which can be flexible. Just as in medicine, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

2. Plan for a long-term, continuous program. Don't start and stop: make a commitment to the financial resources required, the manpower and the time. Remember, this is a vital part of your project: use the best-qualified people you can. You wouldn't send a

second-rate engineer to design a project — well, don't send someone in to manage your public affairs who doesn't know what they are doing. It is a specialized skill and should be recognized as such.

3. A local presence is vital: where possible, use local people. At first, they may be in support positions, but as they are trained, they can move into more senior roles. You need that contact, that networking.

4. Remember the difference between education and promotion. What you are trying to do is overcome concerns and/or fears, and you do this most effectively by an educational approach on which you can build long-term support.

5. You can't convert everyone. You should quickly recognize those groups and individuals you should concentrate on and who have the potential for building your support base, while your efforts with the opposition are to be polite and try to neutralize their circle of influence.

6. Your senior executives and technical people must be intimately involved. This is not a PR exercise. Local people want to see and hear from the man or woman at the top, and they have to be personally involved in the community. They are the only ones who can make commitments that the public will believe, and they are the ones who will be accountable afterwards. Make sure that public involvement has a high priority on your management's agenda.

7. If you go into this effort, you must be prepared to listen and, where a valid point is made, be willing to be flexible and adapt plans to reflect these points or explain why they cannot be changed. Local people will

have expertise which is valuable and which should be considered in the planning process. A proponent should not appear "above them all" and unwilling to consider changes and adaptations to reflect local input and values.

8. You must understand other underlying issues which may affect your project plans. They may not be issues which you would ordinarily think of, but that is where your intelligence system is so important and your understanding of the "external environment" which affects your project. For example, if, as is now the case, the question of rationalization of West Coast fisheries is uppermost in the minds of politicians and bureaucrats and target groups, you need to understand these issues involved and how they may affect a project you embark on which may interact with what you want to do with the fisheries, otherwise you may be the pawn in the game and traded off for someone else's political advantage.

9. Finally, remember that political support is ephemeral and reflects the perceived majority. That is why it is so vital to ensure that you allow enough time to change perceptions if that is required, as was the case in Quinsam — and that takes longer than people think. It is also essential to maintain those perceptions. One can use an analogy to boxing: you can put on a great fight, but if you get knocked out in the final round, it's game over. As we all are well aware, the process of approval is a long one, and no one needs a knockout in the final round.

Thank you for this opportunity of presenting these views, and I look forward to meeting and talking with many of you later today.