

The project: Middle Bass Island State Park

The Ohio portion of Lake Erie is home to several small and medium-sized islands including the Bass Islands. In particular, when 124 acres of land on the 954-acre Middle Bass Island came on the market in 1999, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources jumped at the opportunity to purchase that land parcel, which represents 18% of the total island. The property is Ohio's 74th state park and will include a full service marina, campgrounds, day-use facilities and opportunities to introduce visitors to the distinctive cultural and environmental features unique only to Middle Bass Island. It is an opportunity to provide access to Ohio's waterways in a market where private "shoreline ownership" is becoming prevalent for a select few, and public access is becoming scarce for the many. It is a simple concept for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, which has successfully implemented park projects in many other parts of the state over the past 60 years. This effort on Middle Bass Island is to be no exception; -- or is it?

Unique natural features

Of course, one of the primary reasons for making the purchase was because of the unique environmental features of the island property. Middle Bass Island, for example, is home to the Lake Erie Water Snake. The only place in the world these snakes are found is in the vicinity of the Bass Islands. The LEWS is on the United States List of Threatened Species. This fact alone makes development on Middle Bass Island a challenge. In fact, it is so unique that the LEWS recently was featured on the nationally syndicated cable television show "Dirty Jobs." The show featured ongoing research of how the snake behaves in the environment and how researchers "tag" and inventory the species, which includes the inventory of the snakes' diet (extracting the "diet" is actually the tough and "dirty job").

Wetlands are another interesting feature of the property. These wetland areas were found in the vicinity of the marina as well as other spotty locations throughout the property. The wetlands make up a relatively small percentage of the overall property. However, some of these wetlands are "category 3" and some of the wetlands are "moving targets." Both of these issues create challenges for mitigation where mitigation is an option; because in some cases mitigation is not enough.

Glacial grooves are another unique feature of the Bass Islands. Glacial grooves are large geologic formations that in some areas are exposed above the soil surface. In essence, during the ice-age when the glaciers moved through the great lakes region, the bedrock was "scraped by the glaciers" leaving large continuous rock features with groove ridges that provide evidence of the power of this enormous ice movement. One such feature is adjacent to the proposed marina at Middle Bass Island. In addition, these formations are also part of the bottom of the existing marina. These are wonderful historical features that provide visitors opportunities to learn about Ohio's geology. But what are the impacts to construction?

Fish habitat in and around the island is opportune for the Smallmouth Bass. The rocky cliffs, known as “alvar cliffs”, on the southeast side of the island provide good habitat for spawning. Also, the marina is a good location for the development of new fish habitat, which is now a component of the new marina design. Improving water quality was also a component of the marina design also will support good habitat for both the Smallmouth Bass and the LEWS. To make this happen, it requires moving the existing marina entrance to the north to make a new channel. However, wetlands, glacial grooves and LEWS all inhabit this area of the marina.

Unique cultural features

Lonz Winery is another fascinating feature of the island. The mid-nineteenth century residents of MBI found the soil particularly well suited to viticulture. In 1859 the entire island was purchased with the intention of establishing vineyards. By the 1870’s vineyards appeared to account for more than half of the arable land use on MBI, followed by peach, plumb and pear orchards. As the population grew, so did the cultural amenities including a cemetery, a school and a town hall. The most prominent feature of the island was the winery and support facilities established for the production of wine.

On a regional level, the winery was considered one of the largest and most proficient producers of wine and grape juice products in Ohio, as well as throughout the Midwest. During the late 1800’s, Lake Erie island wineries, led by the Golden Eagle winery, ranked alongside New York’s Finger Lakes and California’s coastal valley wineries.

Approximately 6 months prior to the state taking possession of the property, a terrace collapse at the winery killed one person and seriously injured several others created serious questions about the stability of the winery super-structure. After the state made the acquisition but early in the planning process, citizens and stakeholders voiced their desire to keep the winery intact and even use it as part of the state park operations. When the idea of tearing down the structure was presented by a citizen during one of the public meetings the idea was met with considerable opposition. Stakeholders all agree that “it’s part of the island history and is the landmark for all of Middle Bass Island; it must stay.”

Within the existing marina, the Middle Bass Island Yacht Club leases docks and land for the operation of the yacht club. While this situation may seem odd to some, it’s not uncommon to have small yacht clubs within existing state park marinas along Lake Erie. This is due to the fact that the yacht clubs existed prior to the state taking over the facilities as part of the state park system. It’s a partnership opportunity at Middle Bass Island State Park; but the exact details of that partnership are still in the “design phase.”

Island residents were relieved when the state announced its intentions of purchasing the property and marina. Initially they were concerned that the property was going to be purchase by private sector and be developed into condos, hotels or simply subdivided and sold to wealthy individuals as “summer homes.” The Ohio Department had a wonderful “island honeymoon.” However, that “honeymoon” was seemingly short-lived and the public’s skepticism of government continues to be a thorn in the side of positive relationship efforts.

The solution

Most of the solutions to implement successful projects on the surface seem to reside in careful planning and deliberate communication. In many cases, we often think the solution resides in the completed project and operation of the facility. That is true, but how you get to the operation phase is the key to success. In this session you will learn the importance of identifying the hidden and obvious opportunities and constraints associated with both natural features and cultural features of an existing waterfront property. You will recognize the importance of understanding your mission, the purpose of a solid planning process and wisdom of public coordination using SDIC (Systematic Development of Informed Consent); a tool that must be used for every public project. SDIC is a tool that is essential to all publicly sponsored projects and some private developments that need consent from disgruntled neighbors, elected officials, environmentalists, and all stakeholders; people who are impacted, or perceived to be impacted, by the project.

Depending on your goal, all natural and cultural features are either (or both) opportunities or constraints. If the ultimate goal is preservation perhaps the objective would be no development, no public access, and no site changes. However, if the goal is public access and conservation, part of the objective must include providing access the environment for visitors. Without public access, the natural and cultural features can not be understood, enjoyed and experienced without support amenities. At Middle Bass Island State Park this includes a marina, harbor master, restrooms, utility infrastructure, parking areas, campgrounds, maintenance facilities, trails, shelters and other day-use amenities. For sustainable projects it’s about balance. This is also essence of the mission statement for ODNR: “balance between wise use and protection of our natural resources for the benefit of all.”

First and foremost, on every major project specifically and accurately identify your organization’s mission; the purpose of your organization. Since every organization has a purpose, identifying the mission may be an exercise of restating the obvious. However, do not neglect the importance of stating or re-stating your purpose for you and your customers. Assume nobody knows or understands your mission.

Secondly, associate your purpose with the project. Make a clear and identifiable connection with the project and your purpose. Make sure the purpose and the project are a clear fit for you and your customers. This is very important for reasons obtaining support (identified later in SDIC).

Thirdly, assemble your team. Strong teams are diverse and may include planners, engineers, biologists, wetland specialists, financiers, legal specialists, real estate specialists, facility

managers, and other resource experts. Also, the team needs a decisive, experienced, flexible team leader; preferably someone with a good sense of the mission, project implementation experience and working through the public input process. Once these efforts occur, the real work will follow.

The team must inventory the natural and cultural features with the knowledge of how and why these features make the site unique. Identify the plants, animals, the soils the water quality and quantity. If applicable, understand factors such as littoral drift and how it can affect a navigation channel along a coast. Identify the cultural features such as buildings, existing site amenities, and overall site infrastructure. Identify off-site features and how these factors influence your site. Meet your potential neighbors. Understand their business and viewpoint with respect to your business and viewpoint. Don't neglect the obvious. Sometimes the obvious becomes the "project nemesis." You must embrace the objective of successfully helping to form a positive public perception of your planning process to ensure its acceptance.

Upon completion of the inventory, this information must be analyzed, compared and evaluated. These features identify "development opportunities;" sometimes recognized as "cost value." For example, if a site has utility infrastructure, know what the utilities can support. If it is not accessible to the physically challenged understand what it will take to make it accessible. If the site is within the view-shed of a historical building or contains a historical structure, know what it takes to renovate or remove a historical structure. If the site has wetlands, know what mitigation could be required for development. Use your team of experts. Understanding this information provides your organization with insight on key issues such as how to deal with the state/federal environmental permitting process and environmental stakeholders, distrusting neighbors, or seemingly endless project implementation timelines; all of which translates to cost. If the mission fits the project, and there is an obvious opportunity then it is all about the cost and cost alone. That is the deciding factor to forge ahead or abandon the project.

If the decision is to forge ahead then the next step is acquisition. Clearly, acquisition efforts may have already started, especially for the organization that has an experienced, well managed team; a team that moves quickly and methodically in the inventory and analysis phase with applicable recommendations. The team presents the opportunity for decisive and relatively quick acquisition. However, in public sector organizations, "quick" can be a relative term. At the least, a public sector agency can be prepared to exercise a real estate "option."

By this time, if the organization has already been working on the previous efforts outlined earlier, public coordination has already started. Public coordination is the key to the success of all public projects. This is where public projects stand the test of public support. This is where your project is potentially stalled, slowed, redirected or completely shut down. However, this can be avoided by using a tool called the Systematic Development of Informed Consent (SDIC).

SDIC is not special, unique or new. It is a common sense tool used to successfully implement publicly (and some privately) sponsored projects. This tool was developed by the Institute for Participatory Management and Planning, lead by a gentleman named Hans Bleiker. SDIC has four main components. They are:

1. Clear and present opportunity (or problem) that must be addressed.
2. Your organization is the right entity to address this opportunity (problem) and it would be irresponsible if you ignored the opportunity.
3. The way you are going about addressing the opportunity is reasonable, sensible and responsible.
4. You are listening, because you care. (If what you are proposing is going to potentially hurt someone, you better care.)

Now, if your organization has been working through the process that has been illustrated thus far, the first two principles of SDIC have been addressed. Now is the time to make sure principles 3 and 4 are employed.

Item 3: this is your process. Your organization's process must be a legitimate process that is inclusive of public input and one that exhausts all the potential and reasonable solutions. However, public input is more than public meetings and open house events. Team leaders generally misunderstand public involvement. There is a key component of successful public involvement. That key is: identifying the opposition, understanding their issues, and addressing their issues with the goal of obtaining their consent. Project managers or team leaders think public involvement is collecting comments, opinions and ideas from the general public. However, the general public is not typically the stakeholder that will slow or stop your project. It's the stakeholder that is "prepared to chain themselves to the tree" who will shut your project down.

You must research and illustrate all the reasonable options (solutions) including the "no build solution," and clearly illustrate why your proposal is the most effective solution with respect to your mission and the opportunity. If you can show through studies and facts that the preferred solution is best, then implementing the preferred solution is quantifiably easier. Most of your opposition will not base their opinion on facts. Rather, they are perceptions that are presented as facts. Here is a fact: "about one third of all recreational boating activity in Ohio occurs on Lake Erie." Here is a perception presented as a fact: "significant increases in litter can be expected if the lower Olentangy River is opened to boat traffic." Base your findings (which support your proposal) on facts that are supported by legitimate studies and surveys. Arguing perceptions is never-ending, arguing facts can be quick and decisive.

All projects are likely going to have a negative impact on at least one stakeholder. It is your responsibility to know these stakeholders and show you care. Listen with the intention of understanding your stakeholders' position. Listen so you may read what is truly important to your stakeholder. Gain insight on your stakeholders' position. Maybe a stakeholder is using your project as a point of leverage for personal gain. The stakeholder may be saying one thing and doing another. The old adage "be slow to speak and quick to listen" will pay dividends well beyond fancy renderings and slick PowerPoint presentations. If you care about your mission, and you care about your project you must care about how it will affect others.

How your project planning process is perceived by all potentially affected interests will largely determine success or failure of a proposed project.