

Why science labs should engage their neighbors

When I began my professional life as a civil engineer, I thought that I would spend my career building bridges. As it turned out, that's what I'm doing—only the bridges that I help build are very different from those I studied in engineering school.

For over 20 years, I have put aside my technical skills and devoted my attention to the “soft” side of decision-making—developing ways to bring vastly different people together to find consensus on complex and controversial topics. One of my clients recently asked, “If this is the ‘soft’ side of science, then why is it so hard?” The truth is that it is not hard at all, but it does require a sincere and sustained effort in order to succeed. It is an effort that few organizations ever put forth.

For the past six years, Fermilab has been making that effort, and it has paid off in dramatic fashion (See article, page 27). Over that period, Fermilab has conducted three community advisory boards, a series of employee focus groups and an employee advisory board. First, in 2004, Fermilab established the Fermilab Task Force on Public Participation. The result was an insightful and achievable set of recommendations for effectively involving the local community in planning and decision-making at the laboratory. These recommendations were instrumental in helping Fermilab manage its first-ever environmental release of small concentrations of tritium beyond the laboratory borders. Next came the Citizens Task Force for the International Linear Collider. The detailed and thoughtful report from the task force showed the degree to which the public can understand and support basic science research.

Today, Fermilab has an active community advisory board to help chart the future of the laboratory and its potential impacts on the community, as well as an Employee Advisory Group to help improve communication and create a positive workplace for all Fermilab employees. Like their predecessors, these boards are tackling real issues and achieving real results for the betterment of the lab and the achievement of its science mission.

Why do these boards work? At their core, they are a forum to create broad-based understanding and conduct in-depth dialogue around issues that matter. By inviting all key viewpoints to the table, we all learn from and about each other. We work through challenging issues before they become crises and positions harden. As people find that their voices are heard, they

also establish ownership in the decisions that are made.

Are the conditions at Fermilab unique? Not at all. I have convened and managed dozens of boards on a wide variety of difficult issues for many organizations and in diverse communities. The results are always the same. Where there is a sincere commitment to engaging stakeholders and the creation of a solid process with diverse stakeholders, people almost always find common ground. As a result, decisions that could easily bog down in personal, organizational, and legal conflicts instead are achieved with broad understanding, agreement, and enthusiasm for the future. Now more than ever, the success of basic science research needs this level of common understanding and enthusiasm.

Building bridges to all our stakeholders—communities, workers, scientists, funders, agencies—is one construction project we cannot afford to ignore.

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Photos: Reidar Hahn, Fermilab



Members of the Fermilab Community Advisory Board discuss how changes at the laboratory are likely to affect the surrounding communities.