

OAIA's 2008 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

GOING GREEN: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT IN ONTARIO

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY PHIL BRENNAN, PRESIDENT, OAIA

At the 2008 conference, it had been our intention to have summary observations offered in the final session. We ran out of time to do this justice. Simon Miles, one of the rapporteurs, agreed to rework his speaking notes for presentation in written form on our web site. Simon's report appears below. Simon is the Secretary to the Board. He offers his personal summary impressions, with the intent of conveying some of the key messages of the conference. On behalf of OAIA, I should like to thank him for this added effort in preparing this report.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

BY

SIMON MILES

Consultant on Public Policy and International Development, and Secretary to the Board of the OAIA

This summation is an overview. It does not pretend to provide a systematic coverage of all we heard. I will attempt to offer you some coherent thoughts that reflect some of the key points that registered with me. I have simply rearranged some of the nuggets of information and wisdom in a way that makes sense to me and thus, I hope, to you.

Keep It Simple

One of the few observations that drew some spontaneous applause from us was Ray Lamoureux's suggestion that we keep it simple. Ray's plea has to be taken seriously if, as he observes, and as Volker Thomsen and other speakers urge, we are to connect with the general public in ways that will lead them to demand that the politicians do more to get us a greener future. And really, the same can be said of getting many civil servants onside.

But keeping things simple isn't easy. As a good friend, Michael Hough, has observed, "genius is a flash of the blindingly obvious". The blindingly obvious appears to be very simple. Unfortunately, it often takes some work to make it so.

The Fundamental Importance of Behavioural Change

In trying to simplify what I heard, I want to take as my focus the message from Hugh McLeod: that what we are really talking about when we are discussing going green is behavioural change. This is so whether we are prompted by the need to respond to the greatest driver that will be shaping our world in the coming years and that is pushing us

to go green – climate change – or lesser drivers, such as the desire for cleaner water bodies and cleaner air.

Bringing about behavioural change is fundamental to the successful implementation of public policies designed to bring about improvements in the quality of our lives. So, as professionals conducting strategic environmental assessments (SEAs) and environmental assessments (EAs), we should be asking ourselves whether what we are doing is likely to be contributing to bringing about behavioural change, or whether we are, as Richard Lindgren, quoting Schumacher, cautioned us, only rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Instruments for Bringing About Behavioural Change

We have got to change the direction of the Titanic, and this will be done largely through behavioural change. Hugh McLeod suggested we have three sets of instruments for bringing about behavioural change:

1. the incentives.
2. the commands.
3. the enabling instruments, being everything from awareness to technologies, and planning instruments.

Those of us conducting SEAs and EAs have a responsibility to be aware of the range of instruments available to governments to achieve certain objectives. First, however, we need to be sure that those certain objectives are clearly articulated by proponents of projects. In this regard, we heard about the role of Results-based management (RBM) from Evan Green. Assuming that the objectives are clear, which is often quite an assumption, those conducting the SEA or EA can ask:

....Is there a better way to achieve the objective?

....Are the right instruments being used?

....Is this initiative, whether policy, plan, programme or project, contributing in the best way possible to what we want to achieve to improve the quality of life, or is it just getting in the way?

....Is there a better option, in terms of the objective and the way of achieving what is needed?

Overcoming Inertia and Encouraging Innovation

One thing that I did not hear from Hugh McLeod, and that is important, is that it is probably fair to say that our society, and western society generally, is at the point where we know we have to act and that we now have to overcome the inertia that is holding us back. As Volker Thomsen observed, Canada has not been blessed with innovation or an enthusiasm for moving forward. Political leadership has to play a central role in getting society to overcome this inertia and to act in ways that we know are right. We heard from the entrepreneurs who are champing at the bit to install more wind power, etc. This represents changed behaviour on the part of those who, collectively, are providing (or will provide) us with electric power. They need to be encouraged. And, as we heard from Mike Brklacich, we really should have started yesterday.

So, again, while acknowledging this need for better political leadership, what can those who are working on SEA and EA do?

Focus on the Big Picture, Alternatives, and Principles

Speeding up the process of approvals was given considerable attention, both at the level of the Major Projects Management Office, by Nada Vransy, and at the level of EA and SEA, by Peter Sylvester and Candace Anderson.

But, rightly, we had cautionary notes sounded by Albert Koehl, Richard Lindgren, Tom Wlodarczyk and Clive Doucet to the effect that we have to be a lot more sensible in making sure we are **focusing on the big picture and on the impacts that matter**. Again, this is part of keeping it simple.

Thus, for SEA and EA:

....scoping matters.

....giving time to explore alternatives matters.

....using SEA and EA to be pro-active in encouraging green developments matters.

As Albert Koehl implied, this can be done quite simply through the clear articulation of **some guiding principles on how to interpret our relevant legislation**.

For example, as part of our effort to **be more pro-active**, we should be guided by principles that will **ensure that the big driver for behavioural change – climate change – will be factored into the planning of future development projects**. Mike Brklacich gave us some examples of the sorts of considerations that ought to be factored into the planning of policies, plans, programmes and projects. SEA and EA practitioners need to bear these in mind when conducting their assessments and asking whether the proposals do, in fact, factor in such considerations as: the need to change behaviour; and, the avoidance of costly retrofits.

This responsibility to be more pro-active was highlighted very well by Tom Wlodarczyk, who showed so clearly how we should be promoting quality of life and community well-being through cumulative effects assessment.

Ray Lamoureux asked the obvious question after Tom's presentation of his clear, common-sense approach: why are governments reluctant to adopt this type of approach?

Tom's response: we work in silos; we have limited job descriptions. His prescription: we need horizontal structures to ensure collaboration. In short, **we need to change the way we relate to one another**.

But there is, of course, more to it than that. There are also **the values that drive the electorate and that will then drive the politicians** to insist on the type of approach that Tom has demonstrated can be taken with today's machinery of government. As Volker stressed, those values have to be brought to the fore. And this is where the OAlA can play a role, albeit small.

Improving SEA and EA Through the Improved Use of the Tools Available

Moving from the big picture to the scope for improving SEA and EA through the improved use of the tools available, we had many suggestions made. Here is a selection from an eclectic menu.

...Introduce more class screenings for more categories of projects.

...Make sure SEA is more iterative within the process of planning a policy, plan or programme, and ensure that it better informs project planning.

...Give the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA) more power to ensure that departments do perform their SEAs and EAs properly. (Waiting for the Office of the Auditor General...and specifically the reports of the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development...to comment every ten years is far from adequate.)

...Give more attention to getting the affected public involved at the right stages of a project's or indeed a policy's development.

... Make more use of the comprehensiveness of life cycle analysis for improving product development. While it may not address very localized impacts, it can be of strategic value to policy makers. And it is of obvious value to product designers.

...Make more use of RBM to keep one focused on the big picture purpose and precisely what has to be achieved to realize it. Obviously, this is of value to those designing policies, plans, programmes and projects. However, familiarity with this approach to planning will also be of help to EA and SEA practitioners in conducting assessments of the merits of any proposal and its alternatives.

On Sector-Specific Issues

This session helped to illustrate, inter alia:

...Where and why there is a need to speed up the EA process and the steps to be taken to achieve this.

...The enabling initiatives we need from governments, beyond speeding up the process; e.g., a Green Energy Act that would enable proponents to be more pro-active.

... The initiatives that can and are being taken by the private sector proponents to get the public more involved.

...The need to change public behaviour relative to transit use.

A Challenge and an Opportunity for OAIA

Yves Leboeuf, Vice-President of Policy for CEAA, suggested that the OAIA should view the 2010 review of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act as an opportunity to contribute our thinking to the debate. To this end, and recognizing that this review is to

be led by the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, he suggested that we should organize some meetings with politicians.

In Conclusion

Each of us will have taken our own messages from the conference. We should think about what we would like to contribute to the 2010 review and, more generally, to the debate about the future of SEA and EA in Ontario and in Canada.

Simon Miles
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