

THREE WAYS TO DEAL WITH RESISTANCE TO SCHEMES

Menno van Dijk offers three strategies for tackling resistance to street improvement schemes based on real-life examples from the Singelpark project in the Netherlands.



Singelpark in Leiden is the longest and one of the most beautiful city parks in the Netherlands, with 6.5 km (4.7 miles) of uninterrupted footpaths around the centre of Leiden (pictured left). Active collaboration between the local authority, the community and other stakeholders is playing a key role in the development, design, execution and maintenance of the new park.

Local residents protesting against a plan is every project manager's nightmare. Objections come from individuals and groups resistant to the planned change. Of course, you should always try to increase support by listening to stakeholders' views and interests. But, for when this is not enough, the three strategies below, with examples from Singelpark, will help you deal with serious resistance to your project.

Strategy 1: Every project has opponents

It's impossible to please all of the people all of the time. You can't keep on adapting a plan. And if, despite all your efforts, you're unable to mobilise sufficient support, it doesn't necessarily mean the plan was a bad one. Acknowledging opposition can also be a good strategy, as you might need to focus attention on a legal challenge and the budget and time this will require. Be prepared, but beware! Decision makers and politicians are often reluctant to push through an unpopular plan at all costs. Strong political leadership is invaluable for a project's success.

The Lakenpark section of the Singelpark was

redesigned in close consultation with residents and interest groups. The additional trees, new footpath infrastructure, biodiversity and playground meant the loss of several parking spaces. A local gym objected to their clients no longer being able to park by the door. A political decision was made to go ahead as planned, facilitating green and active travel rather than cars, as alternative parking is available within walking distance.

Strategy 2: Joint fact-finding

Communicating clearly about your plan is important to enable stakeholders (be they supporters, opponents, ambassadors, or indifferent) to shape their opinion. An advanced communication tool, in particular when stakeholders are questioning information provided, is joint fact finding. Seeking the advice of an independent expert, for example, can reshape negative opinions and help project managers improve their plan.

Key stakeholders co-created the briefing and oversaw the selection of the landscape architect for the development concept. The 'Singelpark Development Concept' includes the desire to create one interconnected park, to use water as a guiding principle, and to work in partnership. This document is used by stakeholders in the subprojects to hold each other accountable and ensure their joint Singelpark vision becomes reality.

Strategy 3: Mobilise the silent majority

The third strategy assumes the plan is good, but that its opponents are simply more vociferous.



Reach out to the silent majority by holding street fairs and information sessions



Plan for the Singelpark project in the Netherlands (LoLa Landscape architects, Studio Karst and Municipality of Leiden)

Supporters don't feel the need to speak up as their interests are already being served or they don't want to offend their neighbours who are against the plan. Sometimes, they stay quiet because they don't know they'll benefit from the plan.

For example, with new housing projects, where future residents are not yet in the picture. Or the future users of a new road.

Getting the silent majority to speak up is easier said than done. Here are two approaches worth trying:

● Be creative

- Use an app or digital platform
- Invite people to a meeting or information session
- Conduct cycling interviews with future users of

- new active travel infrastructure
- Set up an information stand in a shopping mall
- Organise a street fair, a competition or other event to mobilise the crowd

● Seek project ambassadors

- Actively seek out ambassadors for your project and give them a stage.

You could approach a prominent figure, but also consider asking ordinary locals who support the plan to help mobilise the silent majority.

In the Singelpark project, the silent majority was reached by engaging with stakeholders with a large group of followers: Hortus Botanicus and Museum

Volkenkunde, who both promoted the project among their followers.

Striking the right balance

Projects bring change that not everyone embraces. Opposition may indicate a mediocre plan though this is not necessarily the case. The above strategies can help deal with opposition. Strategic stakeholder management is essential to balance multiple interests and avoid giving in to a few noisy opponents. ■

Menno van Dijk is head of strategic stakeholder management at VINU