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Environmental Communication

*The Milagro Beanfield War*

*“Idiots, full of sound and fury, signify nothing.” – The Milagro Angel*

*The Milagro Beanfield War* is a dramatization of issues similar to those facing Cambridge, Maryland, with the proposed Blackwater Resort Development, a residential community to be built two miles from the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The film addresses the effects of a proposed development on a small, rural town and its people. Here I will focus on the communication efforts used by various entities in the film, and compare them with comparable groups from the Blackwater Resort case to find the successes and failures in each.

The first major comparison between *The Milagro Beanfield War* and the Blackwater Resort is the awareness of local political leaders of their constituents' opinions on development. At the beginning of the film, the mayor of Milagro attends a fundraiser for the Miracle Valley Recreation Center, a development that would bring condos, a ski lodge and a golf course to the tiny New Mexican town. The mayor tells one of the developers that “the people of Milagro are 100 percent behind the project.” A member of the band playing music at the event, who is a resident of Milagro, hears this statement and glares at the mayor, showing his disagreement.

This scene emphasizes the importance of local leaders' awareness of citizens' attitudes and feelings toward major community issues, such as development. In Cambridge, the city council tried to avoid this sentiment among citizens by using several

forms of communication to reach out and give them a chance to express their views. The city council devoted a large portion of several town hall meetings to the project, which gave both developers and the opposition a chance to speak. This was a very successful way to create dialogue among citizens; the meetings became so popular that the council had to push discussion on the development up on the agenda to appease the many people who showed up to hear comments on the topic.

Another medium the mayor and city council used to keep citizens abreast of their progress with the development proposal was the local newspaper, *The Daily Banner*. In early February, city councilman Glenn Bramble wrote a full-page editorial that touched on many concerns he knew citizens had with the development, such as its environmental and cultural impacts on the city. He also mentioned the town hall meetings, noting where citizens could find out about their times and dates so they could attend. The editorial was very effective because it addressed the concerns of the citizens using scientific data, and pointed them to an outlet where they could further express their opinions. With this editorial the councilman remained transparent to citizens by putting his opinion in the media and detailing the city council's progress making a decision on the development.

The second major comparison between *The Milagro Beanfield War* and the Blackwater Resort is the use of grassroots organizing to increase awareness and affect public opinion. In the film, Ruby Archuleta, a local woman who is against the development, holds a town hall meeting to educate residents about the negative effects the development would have on the town. She and Charlie Bloom, a local lawyer and writer, create and distribute a petition, and place articles in the local newspaper to spread the word about Joe's beanfield and the developer's plan to push out the residents. As a

result of their grassroots efforts, the people of Milagro rally around the beanfield as a symbol of their land that they want to protect.

The scene was a little different in Cambridge, as many citizens were against the development to begin with, because they wanted to protect the rural culture of the area. Prior to January there was not much public debate on the issue, likely because citizens did not know how to create public debate. This changed when the nonprofit Chesapeake Bay Foundation stepped in and put the regional spotlight on Blackwater. Throughout the winter CBF held a series of successful local grassroots organizing meetings, where staff members instructed citizens to write letters to their councilmen and to the editor of the local newspaper. Also, just like in the film, they passed around a petition, and encouraged citizens to distribute their own copies for others to sign. CBF gave Cambridge citizens who were against the development a vehicle to express their opinions and get noticed by the city council. As Ruby and Charlie did in the film, CBF was able to get people out of their seats and talking to others about the negative effects of development on a rural community.

The final major comparison between *The Milagro Beanfield War* and the Blackwater Resort is the distrust and criticism of non-locals in both scenarios. In the film, the residents of Milagro are wary of Charlie Bloom, a white lawyer who moved to Milagro and started a local newspaper. During Ruby's town hall meeting he addresses the citizens about the affect the development will have on Milagro:

Once wealthier people from out of state move in, they want things. They want new schools for their children, not necessarily yours, for theirs. They want new roads, they want new sewage systems; cleaner water for their shiny new faucets. And for all of these things they are able to pay. But at the same time, you also are gonna have to pay. Your taxes are gonna go sky-high. And it is doubtful, very very doubtful, that any of you will be holding the new higher-paying jobs. Unless, of course, you happen to be a golf pro. So my guess is, most of you will be forced to sell out, and to move elsewhere.

Charlie speaks from his legal experience with developments; however, he does not realize that he himself is one of the “wealthier people from out of state” that he is speaking of so negatively. The Milagro citizens do not know Charlie and have no reason to trust him, because he is an outsider. By working with Ruby, a local citizen, and personally getting to know many of the other citizens, he eventually builds their trust. But their wariness to believe his message in the meeting illustrates how important it is for a communicator to build trust and rapport with his audience, or else his message will not be received, no matter how critical it is.

In Cambridge, the “outsider” criticism was directed toward CBF, the same organization that empowered thousands of citizens to voice their opinions and brought the development debate to the attention of thousands more in the Chesapeake region. The main criticism of CBF from those in favor of the development was that the organization had stepped in “late in the game,” several months after the development was originally proposed. Critics wondered why it chose to all of a sudden care about Blackwater, when it had not gotten involved with it during the preliminary stages of the project. One local resident who described himself as a “‘born here’ Dorchester County resident” referred to CBF as “a considerably less knowledgeable knee-jerk hysteria,” as compared to the city councilmen. This sentiment was echoed by Sandy McAllister, the attorney for the developers in a February Washington Post article on the Blackwater Resort. McAllister called CBF and its followers “come-lately ‘Birkenstock knuckleheads’” and criticized the organization for not participating in the many design hearings that had taken place in years prior. All of these sentiments point back to the trust that is so essential to effective communications. A person or organization cannot

just “swoop in” and try to fix the problems they see; they must gain the trust of those in the community before their message will be taken seriously.

In many ways, the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge is Cambridge’s beanfield. Both Milagro and Cambridge are facing the potential destruction of a natural area that defines their town. Citizens who are facing environmental concerns in their towns must be able to mobilize and voice their opinions to their local leaders, and they need to know they can trust those who offer their help. These two cases show why effective, organized communication is the most important part of environmental campaigns; because, as the Milagro Angel quotes, “Idiots, full of sound and fury, signify nothing.”