

Selling a Leaky Landfill as the “World’s Best Practice”

by Dr. Sharon Beder

In 1989, Australian government authorities decided to use Homebush Bay as the site for a future Olympic Games. Even the chance of winning an Olympic bid, however, could not justify spending the \$190 million that experts estimated it would cost to contain and treat the toxic wastes buried there. The government therefore sought a cheaper, more modest remediation strategy that could be carried out in time for the 1993 Olympic bid.

Authorities considered various options for dealing with the wastes. One possibility would be to segregate and treat the wastes, but this option would have been difficult and expensive.

Another possibility would have been to take a “bank vault” approach—sealing up and walling in the wastes. This approach would have entailed tightly containing the contaminated soil with double liners beneath, soil capping over the top, leachate drains and gas collection and treatment systems. This approach was tried for a badly-contaminated embankment where the Olympic swimming facility was to be built, but the planners decided that it was too expensive to be used elsewhere.

A third, cheaper option was chosen for the rest of the site. It eliminated the gas collection and treatment systems and the double liners. This option meant that the wastes would continue to leak into underlying groundwater. A consultant to the government explained the reasoning behind this approach:

The liability associated with deterioration and/or failure of a “bank vault” secure landfill remained constant with time, but its probability of occurrence increased with time as the facility aged. By contrast the leaky landfill would over time carry less liability as the quality of leachate eventually improved. Therefore it is an intrinsically more robust or resilient way of limiting risks.

In other words, the waste would be disposed of by letting it slowly leak into the surrounding environment, rather than risk the financial liability of a possible sudden and more traceable major failure in the future.

In public discussions, however, these cost and liability issues were not raised. Instead, the public was told that the leaky landfill was the only feasible option, given the difficulty of treating the diverse range of chemicals that were present on the site. The option of a more secure “bank vault” landfill was not discussed outside of consultants’ reports.

By choosing the leaky landfill option, the planners were able to reduce the cost of remediation of the Olympic site from \$190 million to \$69 million, including landscaping and road base preparations. This

enabled most of the remediation to be completed by 1993, in time for Sydney to win the bid for the 2000 Olympic Games.

EXCLUDING THE PUBLIC

Australian guidelines are quite explicit about the public’s right to know and participate in decision-making about the clean-up of contaminated sites. The remediation work at Homebush Bay, however, was carried out without proper public consultation. The government’s reports on contamination at the site and the risks associated with it have not been published. In their place are newsletters and brochures produced for public relations purposes.

In 1992, when the remediation was already underway, a local environmental group conducted a survey which found that 71 percent of the respondents felt they were not getting enough information to form an opinion about what was being done in the Homebush Bay area. Roughly the same number—75 percent—said they had not received enough information to satisfy them that the area would be safe for people to live and work.

The usual process in New South Wales for involving the public in such decisions is to issue and seek public comments on an environmental impact statement (EIS). For the Olympic site, however, the NSW Minister of Planning was given full authority to make decisions without the normal consultation process. The reaction of Greenpeace Australia’s Lynette Thorstensen is a telling indication of how deeply the venerable environmental crusader had allowed itself to be co-opted. “At this stage we are much more interested in seeing the green development up and running than having ourselves locked up in disputes about process,” Thorstensen stated.

The urgency to get the Games ready without bothering about due process is something that the Olympic authorities undoubtedly appreciated. Public relations is a much simpler and more controllable process than genuine public consultation.

In the absence of true public participation, PR around the Homebush Bay site has focused on vacuous media stunts and photo opportunities. A brochure by the Olympic Coordination Authority falsely describes the remediation of the site as the “world’s best practice.”

On October 31, 1998, the OCA also organized an “Olympic Neighbors Day.” Titled “the Big Clean-up,” the event took area residents on a tour of the nicely-landscaped Olympic site, while avoiding mention of the toxic wastes buried underneath the new lawns and shrubbery that will be slowly contaminating these neighbors’ groundwater for years to come. n