The Charge

You have just been asked to become the neutral chair of a citizen’s committee appointed by the Clarkson Airport Authority (AA). The committee’s task is to develop improved and consensus-based procedures for noise abatement at the municipal airport. It is a highly controversial and emotional issue for the affected neighborhoods, and past attempts to develop noise abatement regulations have ended in bitterness and deadlock. This time the Airport Authority wants to do it right. Having a strong committee chair will be critical to the effort. The Authority representatives have given you the following background information and have asked that you notify them of your decision in a few days. You have agreed to consider the offer and to inform the Authority by letter, specifying the conditions under which you would agree to the post, or detailing the reasons for which you have declined.

A History of Conflict

The most recent set of noise abatement regulations was developed seven years ago by Airport Authority staff. In keeping with the Authority’s charter, all recommendations on such matters must pass thorough the management hierarchy of the AA and be approved by the elected board of directors of the Authority. Only then can a recommendation be forwarded to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for approval and implementation. In the case of the noise regulations, all required approval channels were cleared, the FAA approved the Clarkson Airport Authority’s recommendation, and the regulations were passed to control tower staff for implementation.

The Airport Authority’s technical staff agreed that the regulations were solid. But many new neighborhoods were now affected by airplane noise. Local residents living in the flight paths grew increasingly incensed, and a nasty set of public protests, a letter-writing campaign, and complaints to local politicians managed to make life miserable for the Airport Authority’s noise abatement staff, as well as for executive-level managers who
felt the political heat. Since Clarkson had a tradition of local neighborhood involvement, the very active neighborhood associations took up the battle cry, packing a number of Airport Authority Board meetings. The associations then initiated a recall campaign of several county legislators and Authority Board members. Furthermore, the airline pilots weren’t happy with the maneuvers they had to make to comply with the new regulations. The air traffic controllers found the arrangements difficult to implement as well.

**Hope for a Solution?**

In essence, the Authority’s technical staff believed that the range of possible noise abatement solutions was highly constrained. The wind patterns and location of the airport, they thought, made it very unlikely that much more could be done, but they were willing to give it a try. Angela Johnson, public affairs coordinator of the Authority, was given the job of developing a public involvement process and getting it launched toward a successful conclusion.

Johnson had the following set of ideas about how to construct a successful process: 1) to ensure that the citizen’s committee believed that their recommendations would be taken seriously, the Authority should agree to pass the committee’s recommendations directly to the FAA, without any changes by the Authority; 2) to be responsive to neighborhood-level concerns about a new noise abatement policy, each member of the County legislature should appoint two representatives to the citizen’s committee; and 3) the Airport Authority should hire a consultant to work with the committee on technical issues, so that the AA’s in-house staff could concentrate on their other duties as well as on this project.

Based on past experience, Public Affairs Coordinator Johnson expected the citizen’s committee meetings to be fractious, so it was important to find a chair who could manage controversy effectively.

**A Well-Considered Response**

In view of the above information, consider your answer and write a letter to the Public Affairs Coordinator outlining your reasons for accepting or declining the Authority’s invitation to chair the citizen’s committee.