



## OVERCOMING NIMBY OPPOSITION

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Most major development projects proposed for urban environments are likely to be challenged by NIMBYs. Whether the project is a power plant, a sewer treatment facility, or public housing, opponents are likely to raise the rallying cry of “Not in My Back Yard.” No matter how needed is the proposal or infrastructure improvement by the community at large, someone is bound to object, and such opposition can derail, delay, or increase project costs geometrically. Below are several best practices ranked in order of importance that can help municipal governments and other proponents overcome potential citizen criticism and NIMBY opposition.

### TALK TO SUPPORTERS FIRST

The best way to avoid a NIMBY fight is to identify, recruit, and mobilize pro-project allies first. If people believe most of their fellow citizens support a development proposal, they are less likely to voice opposition to it. It is human nature: We do not want to be unpopular with our neighbors. Similarly, if those who generally support a proposal hear their fellow citizens speak out in favour, they are more likely to voice their own support. Community leaders and individuals in the middle with no fixed opinion also are more likely to make up their mind in favor of a project if they believe it is generally supported. This is the bandwagon effect in action, because humans are social creatures who tend to follow the crowd, and will often adjust their thinking to act and believe in the same way as the perceived majority of their neighbors.

Of course, the reverse is also true: If citizens think all their neighbors oppose a project, they are more likely to jump on the opposition bandwagon and full-blown NIMBYism will spring to life. Again, the antidote is to mobilize pro-project supporters who are willing to publicly stand up and be counted.

Vocal supporters can be particularly helpful if the news media is likely to address the project controversy. The natural inclination of the press is to juxtapose quotations from hostile neighbors with statements from municipal authorities or the property owner. Neighborhood David vs. Government Goliath is an easy story to write and sure to engage readers' emotions. It is critical that this characterization be sidestepped by enlisting credible supporters from the community to act as spokespersons. These can be pro-project neighborhood activists, taxpayer association leaders, former public officials, or Chamber of Commerce executives who are both articulate and willing to speak for the good of the community. These community spokespersons should be well briefed on issues associated with the development and perhaps receive media relations training to prepare best for responding to press queries.

## **PICK THE LOW-HANGING FRUIT FIRST**

Crucial initial tasks include identifying supporters, recruiting them through community outreach and then mobilizing them to express their support for the project. Such supporters can be found easily in various broad constituencies:

- Obvious direct beneficiaries (construction workers, suppliers, new facility workers, proposed project site property owners)
- Indirect beneficiaries (merchants who would sell goods and services to new workers; local chambers of commerce)
- Potential project users (industries that are heavy users of infrastructure; families that might live in public housing)
- Special interest groups (organizations motivated by ideology)

Naturally these constituencies will vary greatly depending on the type of development proposed: Faith groups and non-profit service agencies may be willing to support public housing or mental health facilities; unions will be more likely to back infrastructure facilities that offer jobs to their workers; realtors and homebuilders will likely line up behind a sewer treatment plant that allows construction of housing; an aluminum manufacturer and its suppliers might support a power plant. An effective community outreach program will speak to all these groups, seek their input, and solicit their support well in advance of any extensive outreach to likely opponents.

In addition, members of the general public may support the project because of their beliefs or simply because the project is in the public interest. These individuals or organizations may be identified because they spoke in support at civic meetings on similar projects, wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper, or through other means. If there is a high expectation of general support in an area, a door-to-door or telephone canvas can be used to effectively solicit supporters. For example, survey research may reveal that men in working class neighborhoods will strongly support a project that offers hundreds of new blue-collar jobs. It makes sense to recruit supporters from that target audience.

Finally, after initial attempts at supporter recruitment have borne fruit, use previously collected project endorsers to build additional support, by asking these endorsers to share their address book and identify (and sometimes themselves solicit) similarly like-minded people. Knowing that credible community leaders already approve of a proposal makes it easier for others to extend their support. And once a strong group of supporters are on hand to back them up, responsible leaders will be more willing to do the right thing by endorsing the project. Without that initial support, for example, there is modest likelihood that a chief of police or other public safety officials will wager their reputation by going on record with their enthusiasm for quality public housing.

Notice that the first two tips listed above end with the word “first.” Because we want to address the NIMBY problem head on, there is a natural tendency for project sponsors and local government to initially focus on outreach to potential opponents. Resist that impulse and contact potential supporters first. Once third party allies have been lined up, there will be enough time to contact those more likely to oppose the project than not.

## **MOBILIZE SUPPORTERS**

Recruitment of supporters alone is insufficient. The most effective community relations program in the world is worthless if public opinion leaders and decision-makers are unaware of public support. Here are two ways to convince city hall that the public supports a project:

- Citizens can communicate their support directly, such as through letters, emails, personal testimony at hearings, postcards, petitions, phone calls, or meetings with city council members.
- Citizens can express their support through the media, through letters to the editor, blogs, social media, opinion articles, talk shows, etc.

Both these means of publicly communicating support should occur later in the planning process, beginning immediately before or sometimes after the commencement of outreach designed to minimize opposition. What is needed early on is recruitment of supporters, not mobilization. Recruitment consists of securing commitments to back a project, generally in writing from individuals or by vote of organizations. It can be as simple as a signature on a petition or endorsement card, or a letter held by the project sponsor until the right time comes to disseminate it.

## UNDERSTAND THE FOUR CAUSES OF OPPOSITION

After outreach to and recruitment of supporters is well underway, it is time to begin outreach to opponents. Minimizing opposition is largely a matter of fully understanding its root causes, which usually fall into four categories: Misinformation, Emotional Needs, Conflicts of Values, and Conflicts of Interest. The type and intensity of outreach efforts needed to defuse opposition largely depends on which causes are at play. For example, public information campaigns can certainly be helpful in minimizing opposition based on misinformation. But widespread dissemination of accurate information through such campaigns may be counterproductive if the primary root cause of opposition is not based on misperception of the facts. As we will see, such tactics can actually stir up opponents if their opposition is based on emotional needs.

However, NIMBY opposition is often based on misperceptions or misguided information based on rumors regarding a project's impact on its surrounding area. For example, neighbors may believe that a major project will be built without transportation mitigations, thus significantly increasing traffic. Showing specific plans to add lanes to a highway and/or add public transit bus routes may minimize fears of added traffic.

### Correct Misinformation

This is the type of opposition that is the simplest to deal with and overcome, by simply making sure that the actual facts are presented in a clear manner through a public information campaign. Project sponsors can sometimes depend on extensive one-way communication mechanisms, (i.e. direct mail, newsletters, fact sheets, blast emails, websites) to disseminate correct information to concerned citizens. This approach allows full control of the message and enables quick responses to misinformation. Project materials should include simple graphics in order to focus citizen attention on the relevant facts and figures needed in order to make informed decisions. In the case cited above, clear graphics that show plans to add highway lanes would help minimize fears of added traffic.

However, just providing correct information in an impersonal fashion is often not a magic pill to deal with all resistance. No matter how authentic the intention of government or project sponsors to inform the public about the project, it is critical to hear from the citizens themselves and listen to their fears, concerns and suggestions. This is particularly true when feathers have already been ruffled by emotionally-charged misinformation. The old saying that "a lie can travel around the world twice in the time it takes for the truth to get its pants on" applies here, with certain types of misinformation requiring more sensitive handling. Interactive or two-way communications are preferred in this situation, or when the complexity of the issue requires a detailed explanation. This can include small group meetings (including coffee klatches in neighbors' living rooms), person-to-person briefings, door-to-door canvassing, or open house presentations in which the project team has an opportunity to establish a personal bond with attendees.

### Meet Emotional Needs

Opposition from community activists often may have little to do with the actual project itself. Some people who view themselves as community leaders become involved in land use disputes simply to validate their community leadership role and to feel like a pivotal part of the decision-making process. They expect to be consulted, and any failure to acknowledge their status seems to confirm that municipal government intends to run roughshod over community concerns. Receiving a glossy brochure in the mail would only fan the flames with such individuals who believe their special status should be recognized by personal interaction. Fortunately, meeting prospective opponents' emotional requirements is frequently the least expensive means of reducing NIMBY opposition. Going over plans for the project with Mr. and Mrs. Jones in their living room is far less costly than paying for major mitigation measures, or years of delay. Again, personal interaction is preferred in this situation, with one-on-one or small group meetings preferred.

The same principle may apply to proximate neighbors of a proposed facility who want recognition from local government that they are most impacted by the project. They may demand respect by lashing out at those who fail to seek their advice and counsel first. If the number of adjacent households is small, it is advisable for project sponsors to canvass door-to-door on a weekend to meet the neighbors face-to-face. If the project sponsor is likeable and is a good listener, the results are often surprisingly positive. Treating such proximate neighbors and community leaders deferentially can sometimes secure their support simply because the project sponsor has personally asked for their help and insight. Often, community leaders may believe this support will gain them a bandbox for public recognition or deepen their ties with city hall.

Unless required by law or local government regulations, avoid conducting public participation in the form of mass meetings. The least appropriate communication mechanism is the large informational meeting format in which local government authorities and project sponsors opponents stand up at the podium and dispense information. Meanwhile, faceless opponents in the crowd vie with each other for the chance to shout the most hostile questions designed to trip up the presenters. Dispensing public information in this manner is inherently condescending, because it implies that the presenters have the facts and the neighbors can contribute little to the decision-making process. Just as in a classroom where the teacher lectures to the students, the presenters are in a position of authority and the audience may resent being treated in a paternalistic manner.

Large public participation events of this type not only tend to anger participants, but they can also turn into confrontations. Furthermore, they create a marvelous forum for potential opponents to meet each other and trade arguments. While mass informational meetings are an inappropriate means of meeting community leader emotional needs, they are equally unproductive as a way to deal with misinformation or exaggerated fears of project impacts.

### **Focus on Mutual Priorities Rather than Conflicting Values**

Opposition based on a conflict of values is typically the most difficult to address. Some people perceive land use debates as battles between good and evil, particularly with regard to environmental values. For them, environmental preservation is an absolute moral goal that cannot be negotiated. It is critical to not publicly disparage opponents' ethical values. Instead, focus on other values held in common and problems that all agree must be solved: Unemployment, municipal solvency, the quality of local education, etc. If project sponsors also hold a moral commitment to protect the ecology, they should affirm this shared goal. Moderate citizens may then be able to set aside differing values to work together to find solutions to these common concerns. If ideologues refuse to talk cooperatively with an "evil" developer, however, then the best approach may be to bring other more moderate stakeholders into the public participation process.

### **Negotiate Conflicts of Interests**

A fourth root cause of opposition is a conflict of interests. Land use projects frequently cause a battle between perceived positive interests and negative interests. Most people will support a project when they believe it creates benefits that will improve their lives, such as new jobs, new public services, new housing opportunities, etc. However, it is important to remember that many people fear losing what they already have more than they believe in future benefits. They fear more traffic and cars in their area, less open space or more crowded schools, services or other changes to the status quo.

How to deal with differing interests to help reach a conclusion that is satisfactory for all is the next issue. There are two main ways to deal with opposition to a given project: persuasion, and negotiations. The usual first choice is to try and persuade the opposition to see things from a particular point of view. Project sponsors often use rational persuasion, i.e., a logical presentation of the facts and issues in order to convince citizens of the worth of the project. However, if persuasion cannot convince the opposition to lay down their arms and give up the fight, it may be necessary to move into negotiations.

Before going any further into the subject of negotiation, it is crucial to note that making concessions is usually the most costly and least effective way to resolve conflict. Concessions can cost millions and should be avoided when opposition can be resolved in other ways. Even if negotiations fail to produce a compromise that all parties can live with, engaging in the process alone can nonetheless further development goals. Negotiations remove the anonymity between project sponsor and neighbors, and make it difficult to demonize the other side. If some of the opposition results from neighbors' feelings that they have not been consulted and respected, then sincere interaction can induce the neighbors to offer you reciprocal respect. Finally, even if both sides do not agree on all parts of a compromise solution, the negotiation process can result in a development proposal that is more responsive to community concerns. Local government decision-makers may decide that the revised plan developed during negotiations more than meets neighbors concerns, even if some remain dissatisfied with certain elements of the project.

However, it is important to go into negotiations with a positive attitude toward potential concessions. There are numerous types of concessions to consider during negotiations:

- **Compromise:** A project can be modified to remove the real or perceived threat to citizens' interests. Project modifications often involve physical changes related to density, height, acreage, use and so on.
- **Exchanging Concessions:** Unavoidable negative impacts can be reduced to lesser levels by trading concessions. Giving up something of lesser importance to the development's viability in order to gain a concession of greater importance may be feasible. Like project modifications, improvement measures are aimed at meeting neighbors' negative interests to preserve the status quo.
- **Offering Counter-Balancing benefits:** A new element, service, or program that is so attractive to citizens that it offsets the negative impacts of the project can be proffered.
- **Expanding the Pool:** If the total amount of potential resources seems too small to satisfy everyone, then the pool can be made larger. For example, to satisfy neighbors concerned about the potential for increased crime, the municipality may agree to double the number of street lights or increase police patrols in a neighborhood. Other stakeholders outside the debate may also be called upon for assistance. For example, construction unions might be asked to establish an apprenticeship program to train local youths in building trades and ensure that they receive a certain number of jobs from the project.
- **Joint Decision Making:** Neighbors often advocate for equal decision-making powers between citizens and project sponsors. The danger with joint problem solving, however, is no project may occur unless the project sponsor and the neighbors are both satisfied. Formation of a community advisory committee with representation from several stakeholders may be more acceptable, provided that no one stakeholder has veto power. By majority vote of its members, this committee can be empowered to provide counsel on a development scheme to the governmental decision-makers.

All NIMBY opposition is not alike, and the wrong type of outreach response can create more problems than it solves. Identifying the cause of such opposition is crucial in shaping a proper response to potential opponents. A good offense can also be key to a good defense. Equally as important as minimizing opponents is identifying, recruiting, and mobilizing supporters. This will influence the news media, the general public and decision-makers, while also helping to reduce opposition.

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