



Stopping NIMBYism in its Tracks

Five guidelines for preventing project opposition from spinning out of control

BY JAMES KENT

The Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome is often believed to be the creation of a community that is resisting or reacting to a new project. However, NIMBY issues do not begin as uncontrollable events that are guaranteed to stop projects. Rather, they emerge as the result of how a project is first introduced to those who will be impacted by it.

How a project is implemented into the community determines whether support will develop, maintain and grow—or if opposition will take over. In announcing a new project, companies typically start with a press release or a formal community meeting. Using either one of these options as the very first communication is guaranteed to open the door to a NIMBY reaction. People will feel threatened if they haven't been given an opportunity to participate in and control their own environment. Without a voice in the matter or a mechanism for handling the change, their only avenue for relief is resistance.

To avoid creating a disruptive reaction up front in the lifecycle of a project, a different form of community interaction is needed. An approach that has demonstrated great success is based on using informal

networks and face-to-face communication when a project is first being proposed. By speaking casually with the locals, developers can acquaint citizens with the project in a manner that allows them to informally discuss any issues or concerns. By doing so, people impacted by the project will be able to understand its benefits and impacts, long before a formal meeting is held or a press release written. Seeking out local gathering places such as farmers markets, beauty salons, coffee shops and restaurants is an ideal way to start the process.

Reducing Social Risk

The following five guidelines can help you gain an understanding of local cultural issues, while reducing the social risk and preventing a NIMBY reaction from occurring or spreading.

- 1 **You are an outsider as well as a future part of the community.** Learn about the community before engaging in formal meetings or activities. Study how a community operates before intruding. Are informal networks recognized as trusted communicators or natural helpers? Are there known opportunists? The more you know about the people, the better your chances of getting your project accepted into the culture.
- 2 **People know more about their environment than anyone else.** That means people have learned to adapt to change in their own way. By understanding how a community perceives and manages change, your project can be positioned accordingly.
- 3 **Give impacted citizens a voice.** What is important to the community and how does the project fit into the local culture? If we assist people to participate in managing potential changes in their environment, the project can be absorbed into the fabric of the community and everyone benefits.



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4 People trust day-to-day and face-to-face communication. It is essential to have a company person on the ground daily to interact routinely with the citizens, thereby providing predictability and consistency.

5 Engage the affected people directly. Their interests are likely to be broad and relate to the wellbeing of the community as a whole. Relying on formal groups or stakeholders in understanding community issues is problematic. Their interests are narrow and focused on their own goals.

Using these guidelines, potential NIMBY protesters are known to become part of a working relationship with the project. So when the ideological folks show up at the first

meeting—and they always do—these engaged citizens are able to act as buffers to any attack from narrow or vested interests.

Creating Goodwill

Community relations are now linked to project success. Therefore, all project planning should include an upfront community assessment and informal face-to-face communications. Knowing about culture and its influences on behavior gives industry leaders an effective way to steer their projects around the pitfalls and other surprises that cause delays or stop projects altogether. So join forces with the community early in the process and prevent NIMBY-ism from ever developing into a project damaging issue. 🌱

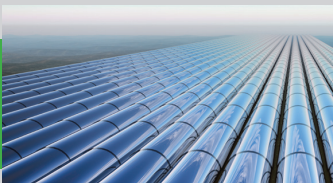
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