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Overcoming NIMBY Opposition Before It Stalls Your Project

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OVERCOMING NIMBY OPPOSITION BEFORE IT STALLS YOUR PROJECT

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The room is packed with shouting, sign-waving opponents. The public record is crammed with postcards, petitions, and protests against your development project. Public officials seem reluctant to establish eye contact with you, and your staff continues to insist that you “do something” about community opposition. So what do you do? Before disgorging a steady stream of newsletters, fact sheets, and brochures, and before setting up meetings with any neighbor you can corral, ask yourself, “Why are citizens opposed to this project?”

Many outreach tactics can actually generate greater community opposition than might already exist, so your community relations program should be as sharply focused as possible. There are four different reasons why citizens oppose land use projects, and each requires a different community outreach response.

Get the Facts Rights

A tremendous amount of opposition to land use projects is based on misperceptions or exaggerated fears of project impacts; for example:

“Whaddaya mean you’re only building 50 luxury homes? I heard you were building a 50-story apartment building!”

“You mean it’s not true that you evicted those little old ladies in order to get control of the property?”

“Hmmm....this isn’t as bad as I thought.”

Opposition based on misinformation is a relatively easy type of resistance to overcome. Developers generally rely on unilateral communications (newsletters, fact sheets, websites) or bilateral communications (one-on-one briefings) to educate people about their projects. Some project sponsors and many public officials believe that the most efficient way to educate the public about a proposed project is to host a massive community meeting. However, enormous public meetings are one of the least effective ways to reduce opposition arising from lack of information.

Large audiences usually have too many issues to address in depth, and time is typically so constrained that people become frustrated because they cannot fully express their fears or concerns. At their worst, huge neighborhood meetings do little more than introduce opponents to each other, allow them to hear and adopt each other’s agendas, and encourage spotlight-hungry activists to stake out irrevocable positions to impress their constituents. When public information is a top priority, don’t rely exclusively on big public meetings to get your messages out.

It’s important to recognize that public information is not a magic cure-all for all community resistance. If opposition is not based on misperceptions or lack of information, too much public information can actually backfire. It can stir up people who were otherwise uninvolved in the debate, validate vague fears, and notify them of new issues to be concerned about. Moreover, public information is inherently condescending, suggesting that the developer is entitled to make unilateral decisions affecting neighbors, but has only a patronizing obligation to inform residents of those decisions after the fact.

No matter how genuine your intention is to inform the public about your project, stress how much you want to hear from neighbors and listen to their fears, concerns and suggestions.

Loss of face

It is impossible to overemphasize the need for neighbors to “save face.” When a citizen feels humiliated, ignored, or pushed around, that resident is likely to go on the warpath simply to redeem his damaged self-esteem and prove to the world that he really *is* a force to be reckoned with. Meeting the emotional needs of activists is a critical part of any community outreach campaign and can be substantially less expensive than making concessions later on in the process.

While it is always important to treat neighbors with respect, it is especially important to do so when controversial proposals are being discussed. Go out of your way to show neighbors how much you respect them. Make personal eye contact. Refer to individuals by name. Instead of telling neighbors they “have to” believe your experts, demonstrate respect for citizens’ intelligence by encouraging them to review technical documents and confirm for themselves that the conclusions are correct. And keep your hands away from your mouth while listening, because hiding your lips while listening sends strong signals of rejection and dislike.

Conflicts of values

Some people perceive land use debates as basic moral conflicts between good and evil. Since the days of the Puritans, progress and growth have been considered morally good, with any environmental impacts in the name of achievement seen as purely incidental. Over the past few decades, however, America has seen a major shift in its moral ideology related to land use and economic development.

A significant segment of society now believes that land has intrinsic value beyond its usefulness to humans and that preservation of the environment is itself an independent moral principle. For environmental moralists, ecological preservation is a higher moral goal than economic growth or property rights. Therefore, it is critical that you recognize when you are dealing with ethical extremists.

If you share your opponents’ moral principles, then say so. If the parties place a different priority on a particular value, then explore your opponents’ environmental priorities in relationship to their other values. Sure, they may hold strong beliefs about environmental protection, but how do those beliefs compare to other moral priorities such as affirmative action, property rights, or concepts of fairness and equity? Even if the parties hold truly conflicting values, the clash does not have to result in deadlock. When land use conflicts appear to be caused by ethical disagreements, focusing on mutual interests and problems rather than on conflicting values can lead the way to resolution.

Conflicts of interest

Land use projects tend to pit positive interests against negative interests. Citizens have a positive interest in gaining new benefits they don’t currently enjoy: new tax revenues, new housing, new local jobs, new services, and so on. Most people who support development proposals do so because of the new benefits that come with responsible development.

By comparison, neighbors also have a negative interest in losing benefits they presently possess. Most citizens live in the community because they like it the way it is, and they are not looking for more traffic, less water in their wells, more crowded schools, or other changes to the status quo.

For most people, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and the existing quality of life they currently enjoy is worth a lot more to them than the speculative future benefits you claim your project will bring. That’s why it’s so much easier for opponents to turn out troops to stop your project than it is for you to encourage residents to show up to support your plan—and why it is especially important to make promised benefits as credible as possible.

Developers often use persuasion to convince citizens that the project will not injure their interests. Rational persuasion involves the logical presentation of facts and arguments. Opponents often rely on emotional persuasion such as personal attacks, peer pressure, guilt, and appeals to fear to turn residents against you and your project. Many people, however, respond to peripheral persuasion and use decision-making shortcuts to decide whether they believe and agree with you.

“Everybody hates this, so it must be a bad project.”

Or, “She rattled off a lot of statistics, so she must be telling the truth.”

And, “All lawyers lie.”

The best outreach campaigns are those that effectively and simultaneously use rational, emotional and peripheral persuasion.

Negotiation tactics

Where persuasion isn't enough, then sponsors often engage in negotiations with neighbors to resolve conflict. Before going any further into the subject of negotiation, it is critical to note that making concessions is usually the most costly and least effective way to resolve conflict. Concessions can cost you millions and should be avoided where opposition can be resolved in other ways. When negotiation is the only answer, then there are three types of concessions to consider during negotiation:

- Your project can be modified to remove the real or perceived threat to neighbors' interests. Project modifications often involve physical changes related to density, height, acreage, use and so on.
- Unavoidable negative impacts can be reduced to less offensive levels through the incorporation of mitigation measures. For example, attractive landscaping can mitigate the view impacts of a new mixed-use project. Like project modifications, mitigation measures are aimed at meeting neighbors' negative interests to preserve the status quo.
 - It may be possible to appeal to neighbors' positive interests by offering counter-balancing benefits: some new feature, amenity, or program so desirable that it offsets the negative impacts of the project, such as providing more public open space or community facilities such as child care centers or senior centers.

The right outreach campaign

All community opposition is not alike, and the wrong type of outreach response can create more problems than it solves. If opposition isn't caused by lack of information, then newsletters and fact sheets will backfire. Making concessions won't resolve opposition based on unmet emotional needs. Endless meetings won't solve conflicts of interest. But by carefully diagnosing the cause of opposition and undertaking outreach activities specifically tailored to respond to that cause, you can reduce citizen opposition to your project.

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