



Stakeholder Engagement Resource Letter

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Special Edition

Dealing with NIMBY: Project
Communications in the face of local
opposition – a three part series

In Part 1 the dimensions of NIMBY were explored and we identified some of its key drivers. In Part 2, we examined the primary participants and the role they play in stoking the NIMBY flames. In Part 3, the fundamental communications approaches needed to deal with NIMBY effectively will be outlined.

PART 3: Combating NIMBY

Often a NIMBY situation creeps up on you like a stealth aircraft bomber. You know that the environment and homeowner impacts of your project are minimal. So you think that maybe people won't really care all that much. Or you think that maybe if you implement a communications program you may put so much attention to the issue that you cause NIMBY where one may never have got off the ground? So you think, maybe you should just let sleeping dogs lie. By raising the profile of your project you may inadvertently flush out detractors that would not otherwise have felt motivated to come out against you.

Or you may have just won a hard fought government request for proposals (RFP) competition to build a needed piece of public infrastructure such as a correctional facility, waste management site, power generation centre or highway. Isn't it the government's job to deal with the communications challenge in this situation you ask?

Unfortunately, this type of thinking is wrong. Once a project becomes a NIMBY cause, as the days go by it gets increasingly more difficult and costly to turn the situation around. All the while your corporate reputation is exposed to criticism and project costs mount. Government sponsors will sit on the sideline and watch the process unfold as they play the dual, potentially conflicting, role of contract manager and environment regulator. A passive, reactive approach to dealing with a NIMBY crisis is among the most risky things you can do. So if a 'watch and wait' strategy is recommended to you – resist.

Instead, try a proactive approach.

Research

As we discussed in Part 1, the first proactive step in combating any potential NIMBY issue should be community research. A research based strategy outmatches gut feel or a reactive strategy any day of the week. Ideally, your research should be carried out and analyzed well before the public has learned of the development and formed hardened attitudes.

There are a number of things that you want to identify from the research phase:

- public concerns regarding similar projects, and attitudes toward your industry and company in general;
- key community influencers, politicians and journalists and their past positions on similar projects;
- a stakeholder map may be a useful tool at this stage to identify key stakeholders and what their likely issues and influence will be;
- important pending contextual developments that may have a bearing on local attitudes such as election campaigns, plant closures, environmental crises etc., and the
- history of other developments in the area and the activist patterns experienced.

Your goal is not just to focus on identifying possible dissent and opponents to your project, but it is just as crucial to identify supporters and issues that motivate greater community enthusiasm for your project. Issues such as job creation, corporate philanthropy, increased municipal taxation are all important community values that will appeal to some segments of the community – perhaps the silent majority.

Communications

With the research complete, you will have a better appreciation for how the community and its leadership is likely to react when your project is announced.

You now can begin to plan an informed communications approach and public consultation program.

The communications and consultation process essentially should accomplish two fundamental goals:

1. Muting or reducing public concerns and criticism regarding your project, and
2. Mobilizing supporters to show their support.

Muting or Reducing Public Criticism

Resolving conflict is at the root of all successful NIMBY taming efforts. Curing NIMBY is not just a matter of public information dissemination, more frequent or jazzy communications or artful messaging (although this could help). Learning the tools of conflict negotiators will serve you well in finding lasting solutions to community NIMBY issues.

An often used conflict management approach is to view any conflict like an iceberg. While people maybe talking about above the



surface issues, somewhere below the surface will be lurking concerns about process and even deeper, will be their unmet psychological needs.

Mediators in conflict situations know that to have a lasting solution to a conflict, all three levels must be addressed and acknowledged. Substantive issues can be resolved through the provision of more information or through negotiation or revisions to the project to address complaints. Process concerns are usually not solved but are subject to continuous negotiation and fine tuning. Process issues cause you to look from the outside-in at the structure of the relationship and find a way to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way. Psychological needs are never resolved, but need to be acknowledged and addressed.

As was discussed previously, misinformation or lack of accurate information – particularly about project risks to the community – is the usual cause of NIMBY campaigns. This information gap grows into widely held or securely held beliefs about a project and a substantive issue of concern is therefore created.

But as the iceberg model suggests, presenting massive amounts of information, without addressing the other sub-surface process and psychological needs may actually make a NIMBY situation worse - not better. This is not the time to hold a big community meeting to 'tell' the community about your project, especially if they feel they were ignored in the decision making in the first place (process need) or feel that you are not to be trusted or do not respect them (psychological need).

Large public meetings are settings where opinions get expressed more

than information is provided. People also feel uncomfortable talking about important process and psychological issues such as saving face, trust and building a relationship with you. Moreover, supportive voices will be mute in such situations. Address process and psychological needs by creating ongoing avenues for public input, and holding listening, not just 'telling' sessions. Treat stakeholders differently as needs, influence and issues dictate.

Crusade Based Conflict – BANANA, NOTE, and NOPE variants

There will be those that will be closed to your message no matter what you do. Your project may provide too much of an economic or moral threat for them to react otherwise. Accept this. All you can do with this group is to counter their criticism with information, and by building a support base of individuals who think differently.

These crusaders have given rise to Not on Planet Earth (NOPE), and other NIMBY forms. Moralists and other crusaders, while well intentioned, often become the focus of media coverage of a development project and can be the most difficult of all NIMBY protagonists to quell.

They will position the debate in extreme right and wrong, black and white terms with no room for compromise or negotiation. Crusaders get their support from the community and the best way of dealing with them long term is to cut off this life giving force though an effective community outreach program using the principles outlined in this series and solid community research. Faced with a supportive community, crusaders cease to be the media attraction and political threat they started out to be.

An important tactic in dealing with single issue groups is to broaden the debate and put new issues on the table. For example, protect the environment and raise the bar above federal and provincial standards, create new jobs and contribute to the community. The underlying morality of an opponent's position does not need to be challenged, the task is to get the community aware of other issues and values and avoid either- or positioning.

Crusaders will counter attack by trying to elevate their self interest to universal themes such as environmental protection, job protection and other widely held beliefs to detract the public away from their fundamental, self interested position.

Crusaders can also add a degree of passion to any debate, and a level of emotion that can influence people by its ferocity. In these situations usually sound thinkers can be swayed more easily by irrational arguments and misinformation. Your strategy as a project proponent, is to keep on the high road during these attacks and continue to keep the parties focused on their mutual interests.

Mobilizing Supporters

A significant number of people, possibly the majority, will fall anywhere from being soft critics, to neutral, to soft supporters. Your communications strategy should be to target these individuals to shift them along the support continuum. Finally, there will be strong supporters for your project, which hopefully you identified in your original research. This group should be mobilized to demonstrate support in tangible ways.

As is often the case, people get more motivated to protect what they perceive they have, than vague promises of

benefits they would get in the future should your project go ahead. So it is to be expected that local municipal councils and development authorities often get a rather biased view of community support for a project.

Finding ways to mobilize that support for the benefit of the community at large, media watchdogs and for key government approval authorities can be an important strategy to combat NIMBY and win the community's license to operate.

Mobilizing support can take a variety of forms including signing a petition, taking part in a opinion survey, posting an on line comment, mailing in an endorsement card or signing-up for a on line news letter. These small steps can get your foot in the door in the event that a much larger 'ask' or commitment is to be requested down the road, such as attending a hearing, serving on a panel, speaking to the media, or writing a personal letter of support.

Conclusion

Combating NIMBY forces starts with solid research well before activists and crusaders mobilize against you. You need to see the issue and process from multiple vantage points and create options to close off single issue thinking. Faced with protest, developers need to think more like a conflict mediator and deal with the process and psychological needs of the community as well as those substantive project issues that cause community concern. Finally, focus your efforts on communicating to supporters as much, or more, than you would with NIMBY opponents and crusaders.

Links

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