

# NIMBY: When Affordable Housing Development Meets Community Opposition

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NIMBY (“Not in My Back Yard”) can be a complex and dynamic challenge, posing significant barriers to the development of affordable housing and supports for homeless persons. Dealing effectively with NIMBY takes both time and resources – two things you may not have much of. The “bad news” is there is no quick-fix formula for overcoming NIMBY. What may have worked well for one project or housing provider in a particular community or neighbourhood may or may not work at all for a another project or housing provider in a different community. The “good news” is that NIMBY is not insurmountable. An effective strategy focusing on key principles can help to engage residents to identify and address residents’ concerns in a positive and productive manner – building not only greater support for your project but also more supportive community relationships.

It is important to recognize (and accept) that NIMBY is not a war between the forces of “good” and “evil.” This type of approach typically uses debate to resolve the issues and can escalate to a range of legal challenges from both sides and bad feelings in the community. A healthier view of NIMBY sees the process as a dialogue, negotiation and appreciative inquiry between competing groups in a community. This type of approach involves relationship building, awareness building and developing creative solutions to meet the varied needs and interests of all parties involved. It also helps you focus your attention on being a productive and meaningful *partner* in the community you wish to enter.

## Some Guidelines...

Here are some basic step-by-step guidelines that you can follow in preparing a strategy to address community opposition to your proposed housing project.

### ***Step 1: Know What You Want, What You Need, and the Rules***

While it may sound simple, identifying what you want and what you need can actually be one of the most challenging (and eye-opening) activities in your overall strategy. Before you engage the community and address any opposition, Be clear about your goals and objectives. Know what aspects of your project are “must haves” (your needs) and what aspects are “nice to haves” (your wants). A good understanding of your needs vs. your

wants can help you determine which aspects of your proposed project are negotiable and which are not (i.e., at what point you may need to walk away and find another location or community).

You also need to understand what can and cannot be built in a specific neighbourhood. The local Land Use Bylaw, related statutory plans, and planning standards/guidelines will outline what is and is not an appropriate development or land use in a particular community. This will help you determine well in advance if there is a legitimate planning argument for supporting your proposal in the neighbourhood.

Find out about the legal and quasi-legal standards that you must recognize and follow in your pending dealings with the community, and vice versa (e.g., municipal planning and decision-making processes, basic human rights, standards of conduct, etc.). A good understanding of the “rules of engagement” can help to ensure that parties on both sides of the issue behave and treat each other fairly...and legally.

### ***Step 2: Make Sure Your “House is in Order”***

Before setting out to talk to the community or designing your housing project, take a close look at your current operations – top to bottom. Some housing organizations have experienced significant challenges when they set out to engage surrounding residents, simply because they overlooked this critical step. While these organizations had been operating in their communities for several years without incident, once residents learned of their existence, problems began with challenges about these organizations’ rights to be in their various communities. An expired operating license or an illegal, non-conforming land use can have devastating consequences.

Conduct a thorough and objective inspection of your current activities to ensure that “your house is in order” before you set out to engage the community. Ask yourself:

- Are all of your permits and licenses in order?
- How well maintained is your current facility (the building, landscaping, etc.)?
- How well managed is your current facility (staff and clients)?
- What are the risks associated with the clientele you serve? What policies and procedures do you have in place to mitigate those risks?
- What is your track record? Have you had any problems in the past? How well have you dealt with those problems?
- How are your relationships with the adjacent neighbours? The surrounding community?
- What is the reputation of your organization? Your staff?
- Who are your friends in the community?

Test any assumptions. Patch any holes. Make any necessary repairs before you start to engage neighbouring residents.

### ***Step 3: Establish a Network of Community Supporters***

Once “your housing is in order,” decide how best to engage local residents in the planning process. A good solid base of initial community supporters will help open doors into the community and build trust with local residents. After all, if credible individuals and organizations trust and support you, there is a greater chance that others in the community will trust and support you as well.

Your initial base of community supporters should include recognized and credible community leaders, organizations and institutions. Consider contacting the following people and organizations:

- Elected officials (Municipal and in some cases Provincial and Federal politicians);
- Municipal staff;
- Community association members;
- Local advocacy groups;
- Social service agencies;
- Residents who support the project and
- Representatives from local churches, schools, police, business community, etc.

Use this base network of community supporters to form a NIMBY Committee. The NIMBY Committee will help develop and guide the community engagement process. The committee will be responsible for:

- Keeping the lines of communication open with local residents and officials (e.g., municipal administration, politicians, etc.) and providing a single point of call for any questions or concerns raised in the community;
- Building an argument for why the community should support your project;
- Developing and managing a community engagement strategy to involve residents in the planning process;
- Identifying and engaging community partners to address any concerns raised by local residents; and
- Creating and maintaining a positive profile in the community (public relations).

The appropriate size and makeup of this committee is up to you. Consider keeping it relatively small and including members who are:

- Knowledgeable about your organization, your clients and your proposed project;
- Skilled in communications and public relations;
- Skilled in public consultation;
- Have solid connections to and a good reputation with local residents; and
- Have solid connections and a good reputation with the municipality (planning staff and/or Council).

## ***Step 4: Test the Waters***

Brainstorm potential community concerns before you engage the community. The more prepared you are up front, the fewer surprises you will encounter down the road. While you may not be able to identify each and every potential concern local residents may have about your housing proposal, there are a number of basic concerns that your NIMBY Committee could likely expect. Other concerns will come out over time.

Once you have identified as many concerns as you can as a group, test those hunches. Test the waters to see how many concerns you correctly identified and build a list of concerns you may have missed.

Testing the waters requires that you:

- Identify the leaders in the community – residents and local officials who have the ability to mobilize other residents (either in support or in opposition to your project) – and bring them onboard;
- Start engaging a small group of community members to learn more about residents' values, beliefs, goals and aspirations for the neighbourhood, and any issues and concerns they have about the neighbourhood;
- Start engaging local residents (slowly at first) to learn about any concerns or objections they may have to your project (test your hunches and search for other concerns that you may not have identified; and
- Identify additional people in the community who are willing to support your project and assist in addressing local concerns (i.e., expand your network of supporters).

Once you've built your list of concerns, rank them in order of importance. Then look to your support network to start doing the necessary research and planning to address those concerns. The nature of the concerns raised will dictate who you need to contact.

## ***Step 5: Develop Your NIMBY Strategy***

An effective NIMBY strategy will include three key elements:

1. Communications and Public Relations
2. Education and Research
3. Community Engagement

Each element needs careful upfront planning and consideration by your NIMBY Committee before implementation. Ask yourself how much time, effort and resources will be required to do each of these activities properly. What additional support and/or funding is required to do the job right and within your particular time constraints?

## **Communications and Public Relations**

Keep the lines of communication open to avoid misinformation going out into the community. Have a primary contact person who can field questions from the community and ensure that the correct information is being distributed.

Identify the key messages you want to get out into the community. Repeat those messages consistently and often. Identify your target audiences and ensure that they are in fact receiving the information you wish to distribute. Use a range of media (including “the media”) to get your messages out.

Establish a positive profile and solid reputation (public relations) in the community. The need to build trust and a solid reputation cannot be overstated.

## **Education and Research**

Education helps to explain and justify the need for (and potential benefits of) your housing project in the community and to share the findings of any impact analyses, needs assessments, or other studies that you may have conducted to address residents’ concerns. Education is a two-way street. You will need to learn as much from the community as the community will need to learn from you.

Solid research will help you:

- Build a rationale and justification for your housing project;
- Identify the extent and range of housing and support service needs in the community;
- Conduct relevant impact analyses to verify/validate concerns raised;
- Identify potential controls and best practices that can be used to address community concerns (e.g., traffic calming measures, architectural design controls, etc.);
- Gauge residents’ concerns and objections;
- Identify any local policies, plans or studies that can be used to address potential concerns or objections; and
- Identify the resources that are available to help you build understanding and support for the goals of your organization (e.g., internet, local agencies, etc.)

To build an argument for why the community should support your project, consider the following questions:

- Is your project consistent with local policies, priorities and community plans?
- Will the project benefit the community as a whole? The neighbourhood in question?
- What broader social policies support the project?
- What recent changes have occurred in the community (demographic, economic, etc.) that might support your project?
- Who else in the community supports your project?

- What is the reputation of your organization? How is your track record?

### **Community Engagement**

Create a variety of opportunities for residents to provide their feedback and to be involved in planning the project. Unfortunately, the “build it and they will come” adage doesn’t always work with community engagement. People have very busy and complex lives. You may need to create a team of supporters who’s job it is to actively engage and encourage local residents to participate in your events. Other techniques that help to encourage people to attend public meetings and events include:

- Free childcare
- Food
- Door prizes
- Taxi vouchers, car pools, and other free transportation opportunities
- Invitation letters addressed to specific individuals rather than “Dear Resident,”
- Phone calls to remind people of the event on the day of the event, etc.

### ***Step 6: Implement Your NIMBY Strategy***

Once you have developed appropriate communications and community engagement strategies, identified local concerns, began conducting research and impact analyses to address concerns, and built a broad-based network of support, you should be ready to begin engaging the community in the planning process. Set out slowly at first and build momentum over time.

Consider small group activities at first such as:

- One-on-one meetings
- Neighbourhood teas
- Focus group meetings

Small group activities have fewer people sitting around the table, which means that each person has more opportunity to talk and be heard. They also tend to be safer activities that allow for deeper dialogue and allow for more intimate relationship building.

Once you have a solid coalition of support, understand the deeper interests and concerns in the community, and have the necessary resources/studies in hand to support your housing proposal (i.e., address local concerns), you can consider larger-scale activities such as:

- Community workshops
- Open houses
- Education forums

These larger group activities provide opportunities for residents to work through their concerns and issues and come up with positive solutions to those concerns.

Throughout each of these activities – large and small – it is important to focus on:

- Creating a safe environment for open and honest dialogue (not a debate);
- Building a solid network of support in the community;
- Focusing community processes and activities on cooperation and collaboration;
- Delving deeply into concerns and objections;
- Exploring values and beliefs; and
- Building support and commitment in stages

## **Some Do's and Don'ts...**

Remember, there is no quick-fix formula for overcoming NIMBY. What may have worked well for one project or housing provider in a particular community or neighbourhood may or may not work at all for another project or housing provider in a different community. However, here are some general dos and don'ts that you should consider throughout your dealings with the community.

### ***DON'T:***

- Present the housing proposal as a “done deal.” Rather, present it as a “work in progress” and seek community input to improve the project (keeping in mind which aspects of the project are open to change and negotiation and which aspects are not).
- Wait until the Public Meeting to hear residents’ concerns – by then opposition may be too entrenched. Seek community input and address concerns as early and in the most transparent manner possible.
- Underestimate potential objections or assume that residents will behave in a certain way. Identify as many concerns as you can upfront and then test the waters to identify additional concerns.
- Treat NIMBYs as irrational grand-standers who don't deserve your respect. Everyone deserves respect be they supporters or opponents to your housing project. This also includes you and your clients. The more respect you show to others, the more respect you are likely to receive. Do your best to create and maintain an environment of mutual respect.
- Try to avoid controversy by avoiding neighbours or withhold information. It can come back to bite you. Try to create and maintain as open and transparent a process as possible. Only withhold information that is confidential and justified according to privacy laws.

### **DO:**

#### **Your Homework:**

- Conduct a preliminary community assessment to determine:
  - residents’ attitudes towards affordable housing and/or homelessness;

- Town Council’s and planning staff’s attitudes towards affordable housing and/or homelessness;
- the history of NIMBY opposition in community/neighbourhood;
- community goals and values; and
- planning policies and requirements.
- Gather relevant studies, conduct the necessary impact assessments as well as a Housing Needs Assessment if one has not already been done for the community.

**Involve Residents in the Planning of the Project:**

- Provide opportunities for public input and participation in the planning of the housing project.
- Get the facts out about housing needs in the community, potential benefits and impacts of the housing proposal, controls to mitigate impacts, etc.
- Recruit supporters and residents early in the process.
- Build trust and a solid reputation throughout the process.
- Respect residents’ concerns, feelings, values, etc.

**Educate, Educate, Educate:**

- Share any and all relevant information with residents, Town Council, and local planning staff.
- Remember that education is a two-way street – you need to be educated too about residents’ values, beliefs, goals, concerns, etc.

**Be Open and Forthcoming:**

- Acknowledge and deal with NIMBY and negativity in a calm and professional manner (don’t take the ‘negatives’ personally).
- Listen, hear and understand (be open to feedback vs. defensive; be curious and learn from others).
- Create opportunities for inclusion and empowerment.
- Create safe environments for honest dialogue.
- Share information freely.

**Identify and Demonstrate the Community-Wide Benefits of Your Housing Project:**

- Show how the project can be a community asset rather than a detriment.

**Be Patient:**

- Things take time...build time into your process.



### **Be positive and persistent:**

- Focus on your goals, the need for your housing project, and how you can add value to the community.

### **Learn from Your Mistakes:**

- Nobody is perfect. We all make mistakes. But we also can learn some valuable lessons from those mistakes if we take the time and make an effort to do so. As the saying goes, “it’s okay to lose; just don’t lose the lesson.”

## **And what if you are not currently planning a housing project?**

If you are not currently seeking to develop a new housing project, you may want to do so at some point in the future. There are things you can do right now to either avoid or minimize any future NIMBY opposition should you wish to expand your current operations or develop new housing. Ask yourself what you can do now to:

- Make friends in the community?
- Build positive relations with neighbouring residents and organizations?
- Build awareness about housing and homelessness issues in the community?
- Build a solid reputation in the community?
- Prepare the community for changes that may be coming down the road?
- Encourage the development of policies to promote housing diversity and supports?

## **Conclusion**

While it may not seem like it when you are immersed in a NIMBY situation, NIMBY is an opportunity to build awareness, understanding and support for affordable housing and supports for homeless persons. Face it, you have in front of you a captive audience of local residents who are actively engaged in determining the future of their community. This level of community interest and involvement is not always easy to come by. More often than not, bringing community members to the table to discuss local planning issues can be a major struggle.

In addition to a long list of do’s and don’ts, there are some general principles when addressing NIMBY. Start small and stay focused. Build momentum, support and trust in the community over time by addressing concerns openly and as best you can. The outcome of a NIMBY situation has as much to do with what you do before you have a new housing proposal on the table as what you do during the NIMBY situation.

*A variety of processes are available to address the many challenges associated with NIMBY opposition and to overcome barriers to effective dialogue. For more information on these processes or for assistance developing an effective NIMBY strategy either for*

*your current project or a new housing proposal, contact Matthew MacNeil, Principal of Housing Strategies Inc. at [housing@telus.net](mailto:housing@telus.net).*

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In addition to dealing with NIMBY, Matthew provides a variety of planning and research services including affordable housing strategies, needs assessments, housing feasibility studies, and community land trusts. Matthew's planning programs focus on community engagement, partnership development and capacity building. His clients include municipalities, the Federal Government, private developers, public foundations, and non-profits. Matthew has a Master's Degree in planning from the University of Calgary.