The Challenge of NIMBY Thinking in Rural America

by Ty Beckmann

Change in any setting can be the source of citizen protest. Unwanted change may result from an intended improvement or from the placement of an undesirable entity in proximity to an already settled area. For example, a new highway, a treatment center, or a park might be viewed by developers as a positive change while impacted residents may view these changes quite negatively.

On the other hand, developers seeking to place a dump, a large hog farm, or a prison may be insensitive to citizen concerns about their open space not really being open. In either case, citizen protests against changes in land occupancy can be seen as a social challenge to prevent "Not In My Back Yard" or NIMBY development. NIMBY protests are visible responses to perceived invasions of an individual's personal or political space.

To urban onlookers unaccustomed to having open space or much environmental control, NIMBY protestors may even appear to be individuals with a self-centered, isolationist view. This essay explores both the causes for NIMBY protests and possible strategies for accomplishing environmental change. The aim is to suggest ways to use democratic processes that can reduce NIMBY opposition to necessary environmental change.

Charles Pillar (1991) in *The Fail-Safe Society* quotes William Witte, the Director of Housing and Economic Development of San Francisco: "We experience 'Nimbyism' almost at every turn, every time we do anything" (159). Although San Francisco is a city that has experienced many documented citizen oppositions to change, should opposition to any environmental project be classified as a NIMBY designation? First, to be considered a NIMBY citizen response, the proposed activity must violate the citizen's collective and individual personal space to such a degree as to cause a unified resistance to the intrusion at its inception. A collective negative citizen response to past governmental actions, a failed trust in public officials, an inadequately defined project, misdirected media attention, and similar influences can quickly appear to be NIMBY reactions when, in fact, they are responses to indirect causation factors. Most often, NIMBY opposition involves complex issues that are inadequately addressed by public officials insensitive to the inquiries of citizens.

Gregory McAvoy (1998), author of the article "Partisan Probing and Democratic Decision Making: Rethinking the NIMBY Syndrome," believes that "good decision making is the result of partisan probing rather than insulated decision making" (275). McAvoy contends that with the collaboration of citizens and multiple government officials, including scientists, engineers, and politicians, a truly NIMBY-resistant, citizen-supported project can be initiated.

McAvoy (1998) argues that open consultation between tax-paying, voting citizens and their government officials is essential for the elimination of a NIMBY response to a proposed implementation of environmental change. Even though residents of rural communities are often much...
closer to their governmental officials, the possibility for a NIMBY reaction will exist just as it would in an urban area if collaborative communication about intended projects is not a primary strategy consideration from the start. Also contributing to a rural/urban difference in reaction will be whether individuals believe their views are adequately represented.

Most often, NIMBY reactions are caused by an involuntary involvement of local residents in the political process (McAvoy 1998). For example, a Minnesota proposal for a hazardous waste site failed because “in the minds of policymakers, the citizens’ fears about groundwater contamination and accidents during transport were unfounded” (280). This assumption by politicians contributed to the failure of the project. Obviously, residents were concerned about the possible contamination of the groundwater and the consequences of accidents while waste was in transit; however, because the government did not address citizen concerns, nothing was done to alleviate them. One resident is quoted as saying, “I chose to live up here for the clean water and the clean air, and I guess that is what we have going for us in Northern Minnesota. We’ve got the environment, the health, all these different things going for us. If they bring a site like this in, what could happen as far as groundwater contamination?” (278). This resident’s question went unanswered and, in turn, led to a NIMBY reaction. Residents lacking information from public officials will be naturally suspicious and will be forced to act on their fears. When government planners fail to include open consultation with citizens in their implementation strategies, they can expect the full negative impact of an outraged, ignored, and uninformed citizenry.

In the article, “The Low-Level Radioactive Waste Siting Process in Connecticut: Anatomy of a Failure,” Kearney and Smith (1994) examine why a simple technocratic approach failed because a typical democratic process was not applied (617). This case study examines how the technically rational siting was derailed by an approach that ignored the political dimensions until it was too late to counter the consequent powerful NIMBY reaction that ensued. Although a computer model was used to narrow possible site locations to three scientifically defined safe locations, the noninvolvement of citizens in advance of a declared vote for the project doomed this Connecticut project.

According to the Citizens Opposed to a Radioactive Environment (CORE), the technocratic approach failed, in part, because the computer model used poorly defined category thresholds. Kearney and Smith (1994) suggest, By breaking step three (in the modeling process) into four phases that successively reduced the number of candidate sites, the Service disqualified candidates based on a summed ordinal score. As an example, after applying the criteria in the first phase, fifteen of the twenty-eight sites were advanced on the basis of a score of twenty-two or greater (the range being eighteen to twenty-eight). It was impossible to justify this demarcation point as anything but a numerical convenience, with eight sites scoring values of twenty-one. For residents in the targeted localities, this created serious doubts about the credibility of their neighborhood’s selection. (625)

The lack of scientific validation for the thresholds used to keep or eliminate sites proved to be an enormous conceptualization error made by the engineers who prepared the computer model, for it established doubts about the accuracy and reliability of the program. Voters turned this doubt into rejection of all sites proposed. Such reactions should not be unanticipated; nor should such rejection be judged as irrational.

Errors by public agencies are not the only cause for a NIMBY citizen response. Awareness of past project and/or company failures can also influence community action. Kiel and McClain (1995) document how citizen outrage grew from the past record of a company (241). In their article, the need for an early disclosure of facts that underscore safety, reliability, and trust is reaffirmed. When citizens are confronted with legitimate safety and reliability arguments resulting from an endless string of technical and environmental calamities, which government and business are ill-prepared to handle, citizen responses will focus on failures rather than on the project itself. The list of such calamities, might include the Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and the Exxon Valdez among others that received widespread media exposure (Kearney and Smith 1994, 625).

Although conscientious, safe companies build and operate many reliable and safe facilities, the media is more inclined to report on what is broken rather than what works. Because of media hype surrounding environmental calamities, public officials and corporate planners must remain sensitive to involving citizens before, rather than after, the fact when initiating new projects. Public officials must be aware that a NIMBY attitude can be generated by the media’s representation of the facts. Fear and dread can be heightened by media sensationalism, which causes one situation to be made to look like a universal reality. The media must be converted to disseminating facts rather
Suburban outreach into rural areas before World War II was something only the rich could afford. Following the war, the federal highway program, the rapid expansion of automobile use, the government subsidization of new housing, and the crowded conditions of urban life fostered expansion into the seemingly open spaces of rural areas surrounding urban centers. Duany and Plater-Zyberk (1992) examine this sprawl in “The Second Coming of the American Small Town.” They posit, “...nothing compares to the damage done by the fragmentation of civic life and the radical economic segregation that has accompanied suburban sprawl. Americans long for community ...” (19).

Strangers moving into a new place initially lack community links. In this new existence, an individual or family’s reaction to environmental change arises from an isolated perspective based on perceptions about personal space; however, if joined with similarly held perceptions of strangers living in the same place, the bonding often produces an intense NIMBY reaction. While the original landowner may have resisted change as an individual, the collective reaction of new settlers may initiate strong NIMBY defenses supported by zoning laws and building codes designed to isolate and segregate the identity of a suburb.

Despite the evolution of seemingly quite unique suburban places isolated from the intrusion of change, forces continue to reinforce suburban expansion into rural areas. Part of this growth has been driven by the investment potential of the housing market. Fischel (2001) discusses how NIMBY and housing have become linked:

The tax treatment of homes makes it an especially desirable asset during inflationary times. But even in the long run, owning a home—in particular owning a plot of land on which a home can be built, is built, expanded, or simply left idle—has had an excellent average return. (146)

Houses are huge investments for people who cannot afford any other investments. Homes often represent a large portion of the family assets, and changes in the valuation due to a proposed project invoke a strong response. Kiel and McClain (1995) document a NIMBY opposition spawned by homeowners believing their property values were being jeopardized by a nearby incinerator project. They studied the impact over a 19-year period, which included the planning, building, and operation of the facility. Included in the dataset were 2,593 homes occupied from 1974 through 1992 (241). Kiel and McClain observed five stages of impact:

Stage one is the pre-rumor stage, which takes place before any mention of the possibility of an undesirable land use; ... the second stage begins once news of the proposed project leaks or is announced to the community; ... the third stage, construction, begins when permitting is final and construction of the facility is undertaken; ... the fourth stage commences when the facility goes on-line; ... [and] the fifth stage, or ongoing stage, is a return to “normal conditions” and should be similar to the first stage with prices determined by the supply and demand of the housing. (244)

The Kiel and McClain (1995) study concludes that homes closer to the site experienced the biggest drops in property evaluation. Furthermore, in stages one through three, the loss of valuation was greatest, while housing values stabilized in stages four and five. The researchers concluded,
They [NIMBY projects] often serve a large segment of the population but adversely affect only a small local area and population, whose residents are asked to shoulder the risks and costs of a project while the benefits accrue to the larger public. The volume and vociferousness of community opposition to the siting of unwanted facilities suggests that residents implicitly calculate an individual cost/benefit analysis and conclude that the local, concentrated costs associated with the facility outweigh the dispersed benefits, including an individual estimate of social welfare impact of the facility. (241)

Another factor playing an important role in producing a NIMBY syndrome is territoriality, referring to the space that an individual perceives as being within their personal space. Territoriality has less to do with the devaluation of property and more to do with conscious awareness of the environment surrounding an individual. Within this space or territory, perceived or real invasions are most likely to produce an emotional response. Thus, any perceived change in one's self-defined space can initiate actions to sustain one's territorial control. Fischel (2001) provided the following example:

Living in a home for a long time creates a personal attachment for which changes in the neighborhood (territory) are upsetting. And the well-known (but often ignored) “offer/ask” disparity in economics indicates that people who are already in possession of something need to be paid a great deal more when asked to give it up than those same people would offer to pay for the same entitlement if they did not currently possess it. In short, you ask more to give up something you own than you offer to obtain something not already in your possession. (146)

People’s attachment to their homes influences their definition of territory. Thus, one must be aware of the difference in emotional and economic response of an impacted occupant of a given space and the view of the same territory held by a developer or non-occupant. A positive response to this anticipated deregulation of property requires that developers pay a premium price for acquisition of properties perceived by owners to be devalued by the potential development.

Norton and Hannon (1997) observe that “… when the context encourages respondents to answer as citizens rather than as consumers, one can expect quite different answers to questions such as whether to develop or preserve wild landscapes” (228). The same argument can be applied to most NIMBY issues. Ask an individual taking food from a fast-food restaurant if they believe styrofoam containers are acceptable. They will probably wish for something better, but will accept the convenience with little thought of the potential environmental impact of discarding the container. Ask the same person on a survey not connected to dining whether fast-food restaurants should become more sensitive to their generation of environmental wastes, his or her response might be a strong affirmative. In one circumstance, the individual is a consumer. In the other, the individual is a citizen. When consumers and citizens are equally threatened by a proposed action, a NIMBY opposition is sure to follow.

So what should politicians and citizens do? In a society where unpleasant community projects must be completed, but citizen and consumer rights also must be respected, how should the NIMBY threat be addressed?

An initial priority is for community leaders and project developers to be fully conscious of factors surrounding environmental changes. No space is empty or free from human attachment. Even space not owned can invoke a response if individuals perceive the space as part of their territory. For example, beaches, parks, and adjacent lands not owned by an individual, if threatened, can become objects of concern. Owned spaces have economic consequences to be considered.

Another factor of consequence is information accuracy. The vocabulary of project specification can quickly doom a project if not made specific to details. A professional office building could be as innocent as a home or as objectionable as a strip mall. Consider words like road, apartment, store, park, factory, prison, etc., and imagine the reactions possible without clear specification of the details. Countering factors such as these requires officials to demonstrate a conscious awareness of citizen and consumer needs if they are to build the required trust needed to accomplish project developments.

Community leaders must carefully research the records of intended project developers. Project failures caused by
Rural environments are increasingly vulnerable to the imposition of necessary but potentially hostile environmental projects. Waste must go somewhere, and new power generation will be required. Highways and associated service centers will continue to evolve. Even new housing developments will continue to spread into open lands as long as expectations of current lifestyles of single home housing units are required. The list of potential developments is long, and each carries the potential of hostile rejection.

A successful decision to place something unpleasant, thus warranting a NIMBY-like response, involves use both of a technocratic and political approach. Use of a technocratic approach requires clearly defined rules and regulations in order to ensure procedural credibility. Care must be taken to have citizens fully understand the processes to be used before they are undertaken so that the results command citizen trust. The Connecticut decision to use technocracy was not what caused citizen rejection. Rather, the failure of project managers to define meaningful thresholds on the limits used to narrow site choices and to fully inform residents destroyed citizen trust and support. Adaptations that tie theoretical and systematic procedures together and fully involve participation of as many individuals as possible have the greatest possibility of adoption. In a rural setting, the possibility of fully involving citizens can be an asset; however, if an attitude of superior knowledge is taken by developers, the potential of a strong negative NIMBY reaction is almost certain. Thus, it is important for community leaders to ensure development of a strong interface between the community and project developers.

Conclusions

To avoid NIMBY attitudes and in order to form a more civilized, organized, and trustworthy public response to new development, politicians need to place more attention on details as they work with citizens to develop participatory support in enabling environmental change and community developments. Changes will occur, but “Not In My Backyard” reactions need not be part of the change process.

References


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