

Not in my backyard

MPE outlines some of the steps to take when faced with community opposition

BY AL MAIORINO

COMMUNITY opposition to the local development of a mining operation is an all too familiar picture. Take the following example in which the chief executive officer of a large US coal-mining

corporation wants to pursue a new development.

The economic difficulties have not slowed the company, so the executive decides to expand the business and build a mine near a small town. The management team forms a business plan, collects the proper paperwork and prepares for the approval process. Then, all of a sudden, the zoning commission holds off on granting a permit.

Why? Residents of the areas near the proposed site have created an opposition group to fight the project. Despite the fact that the new development would create jobs, increase tax revenues and improve the local economy, the community does not seem to understand these benefits.

The residents say the mine would be too close to their homes and could be potentially hazardous to their health. They are concerned about waste in the soil and water, and that the construction would create too much noise, pollution and traffic. They also fear the danger to the lives of community members who will work in the mine.

This is when the company realises that opposition is indeed a road block that may halt or even cancel the project. This not uncommon problem is called the 'not in my backyard syndrome' or NIMBY-ism. It consists of strong opposition by one person or a group to a new project or development in their community.

The key to NIMBY opposition is the location of the proposed construction. Communities simply do not want anything that could be dangerous to their health, or merely to their lifestyle. Whatever their motivation, NIMBYs are very likely to organise quickly to communicate their opposition to a local project in an effort to curb development.

NUCLEAR BEGINNING

The origins of NIMBY-ism are somewhat vague. Some scholars believe the concept originated as early as the 1950s. They claim the nuclear research and development in the UK and the US during the early post-World War II period planted the seeds of



NIMBY-ism. People acknowledged the power of nuclear reactors, but did not understand how nuclear energy worked. They feared it as the unknown, thus expressing scepticism to the construction of plants and research facilities in their neighbourhood.

However, the practice of communal opposition to development expanded rapidly in the 1980s. During this period, new industries (biomass, solar and wind power) were developing, and the 'traditional' ones (mining, real estate and transport) were expanding. Relative stability in world politics and the global economy allowed people to redirect their attention to the lives and wellbeing of their own communities.

The main difference between NIMBY-ism of 1980 and that of 2011 is that, three decades ago, community concerns were reasonable and justified in most cases. With the technology available during that period, building a mine could mean noise, traffic and pollution.

The equipment and safety protocols used were far less advanced than they are today, and the dangers of working in a mine were significantly higher.

Since then, the industry has come a long way. With the use of modern technology and strict government regulations, the inconvenience

caused by any sort of development, as well as the dangers of working in or living near a mine, are usually reduced to a minimum. Yet, the sentiment of opposition remains, as does the stigma of local mine development.

The NIMBYs always find a reason to oppose development and even oppose just for the sake of making a statement. Remarkably, members of NIMBY groups frequently support development in general. They advocate clean energy, better transport, more retail opportunities and the creation of jobs. Yet, when a wind farm, train depot, shopping mall or coal-mine project is proposed in their neighbourhood, the NIMBYs are quick to organise opposition.

In addition, 'controversial' and culturally unfamiliar issues usually trigger an ambivalent response. Many people are in favour of anti-drug campaigns, HIV research facilities and rehabilitation centres. Yet they do not want a needle-exchange clinic, mental institution or halfway house in their neighbourhood.

Society as a whole understands the necessity of all of these projects, but, in reality, virtually nobody wants such projects in their local community.

Another issue is the extent and reach of the NIMBY syndrome. The 'backyard' has grown so vastly that, today, NIMBY-ism affects companies all over the world. It has no regard for geography or sovereign borders. Naturally, companies in relatively young industries

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are most susceptible to NIMBY opposition. People attack wind and solar-energy farms, biomass and biofuel plants because they still fear such projects as the unknown, as they did nuclear power. Nonetheless, businesses in more traditional fields, including mining, continue to face NIMBY opposition.

However, steps can be taken to win local support and gain the important 'social licence to operate'. Often, opposition stems from misinformation and poor communication between project representatives and the community. In this case, it is better to play on the offensive; instead of waiting for the opposition to grow, developers should present them with the facts at the earliest possible stage.

FRIENDS AND FOES

It is necessary to look for local support and build allies in order to form a 'supporter' coalition.

First and foremost, developers should identify and create a database of local residents who are in favour, against or undecided about the project. A good way to begin is to carry out a poll, asking local residents their view of the economic development of the region in general, and about the project plan in particular.

The results of the survey may then be published to showcase the positive attitude in the community toward the venture. Once a database of residents has been created, it will have to be maintained and updated frequently for the campaign management to be aware of any changes in local opinion. One way to do this is through a targeted direct mail and/or advertising campaign.

A strong social media campaign may also work as a modern tool to reach out to the community and give supporters a communication outlet. Although many campaigns use modern technology to deliver a message, most grassroots campaigns rely mainly on direct, face-to-face interaction between the developer and community.

MAKE A CONNECTION

The next step is to reach out to third-party groups that may support the project. They could be small businesses or a local decision maker, while those companies or groups with which the developer already has a positive relationship should be encouraged to participate in community engagement.

Residents can express their support for a project through writing letters to their elected officials or newspapers. Those who are looking to offer further support can attend public hearings where they can speak about the benefits of the project. In many cases, an independent pro-group will emerge and participate in all aspects of community engagement.



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FIND A HELPING HAND

Experience shows that hiring a specialised firm is often most helpful in providing a project developer with the necessary tactics to ensure support for a mine's development. More often than not, a standard public relations firm will not be equipped with the necessary tools or experience to tackle NIMBY-ism.

Public relations specialists can help to develop a brand identity, create or improve the company's image and give it the publicity it needs, but expertise in grassroots community engagement is necessary to properly assess a project's suitability, analyse any NIMBY issues and help the company to gain its social licence to operate.

Public affairs organisations (professionals trained in grassroots community engagement) can be consulted to determine if the correct message is being distributed from the company to the community, whether the silent majority is heard, and that the firm is engaging with the issues presented by the community.

In the end, the company mentioned at the start of this article had a decision to make. It could choose to ignore NIMBY-ism, avoid communicating with the local community and take the situation to an unnecessary level of tension. Instead, the company's management team hired a specialised firm, which developed a strategy, engaged in conversation with the community and encouraged the proponents of the project to voice their support.

Soon after the conflict was put to rest, a permit was granted and the company went on to build the mine. The bottom line is that educating and communicating with the local community is a crucial attribute for the successful outcome of any venture.

It was established years ago that grassroots engagement can be the key to success. The question is no longer why, but how? Luckily, modern technology and decades of creative advancement in public affairs mean that getting a company's message out is as easy as ever. If a mining company can understand and address community concerns, its projects will move forward.

NIMBY-ISM IN ACTION

Examples of community opposition to projects

Goldcorp has experienced community concerns at its Marlin and Cerro Blanco developments in Guatemala, including allegations of human rights abuse. Local residents, in co-operation with environmental activists and local social groups, have protested against the mine. The company responded by commissioning an independent human rights assessment and report into its operations.

Sagittarius Mines is experiencing opposition to its plans to develop mines in the Tampakan region of the Philippines. Local residents, along with the local Catholic Church, have been pressuring the government to reject the project. The operation has also been attacked by political groups, such as the communist New People's Army and a militia Muslim organisation in 2008. Sagittarius has consistently reiterated its commitment to community engagement and that it has the support of local tribal leaders.

In August 2010, **Vedanta Resources'** proposal to develop a bauxite-mining infrastructure in India was rejected by the government. One of the main obstacles was lobbying by non-government organisations, which said local tribes had not been consulted about the development and did not want it to take place on their land. Vedanta's share price fell as a result of the government's decision on the project.

Anglo American and **Northern Dynasty Minerals** have faced ongoing opposition to the development of the Pebble copper project in Alaska. Local fishing groups raised concerns about the project's development and potential impact on water quality in downstream salmon fisheries. Both companies have been targeted by direct-media campaigns and by protests at their annual general meetings.