



Defeating NIMBYism

Overcome project opposition through strategic offense and building a local alliance

BY AL MAIORINO

Picture this: the CEO of a large biofuels production corporation wants to pursue a new development. The economic difficulties haven't slowed his company so he decides to build a new biodiesel plant near a small town in Massachusetts. The company's management team constructs the business plan, collects the proper paperwork and prepares for the approval process. In an instant, the zoning commission holds off on granting their permit. Why? Nearby town residents of the proposed site created an opposition group to fight the project. Despite the fact that the new plant would increase the tax revenue, improve the local economy, and most importantly a produce renewable,

cleaner burning, nontoxic energy source, the community for one reason or another is opposing the project. The residents say the new facility would be too close to their homes and may be potentially hazardous to their health. They are concerned about a variety of issues from noise and traffic created by the construction to the dangers of living near a chemical plant. This is when the CEO realizes that opposition is indeed a road block that may halt or even destroy his project. So what does he do now?

The problem that this company faces is not so uncommon. It is called the 'Not in My Backyard Syndrome' (or NIMBYism). It consists of strong opposition by one person or a group of people to a new project or

development in their community. The key to NIMBY opposition is in the location of a proposed construction. It has been suggested that the NIMBY syndrome stems from self-preservation. Communities simply don't want anything that may potentially be dangerous to their health, or merely to their lifestyle and community vibe. Whatever their motivation may be, NIMBYs, as they are commonly referred to, are very likely to organize quickly to communicate their opposition to a local project in an effort to curb development.

The origins of NIMBYism are somewhat vague. Some scholars believe the concept originated as early as the 1950s, however, the practice of communal opposition

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to development blossomed in the 1980s. During that time, community concerns were reasonable and justified in most cases. First of all, the biodiesel production industry was so new that people simply feared it as the unknown. The lack of information obstructed the public's ability to weigh the advantages of biodiesel against the dangers of its production. In addition, with the technology available during that period, building a biodiesel plant in a neighborhood could mean noise, traffic and pollution. The equipment and safety protocols used in biodiesel production were far less advanced than they are now. The risks of explosions, methanol spills and general exposure to chemicals were high. While those days are gone, the sentiment of opposition remains, as does the stigma of a biodiesel plant near one's home. With the use of modern technology and strict government regulations, the inconvenience caused by any sort of development is usually reduced to the minimum.

The NIMBYs always find a reason to oppose development. It seems that very often they are simply "in it to win it." They oppose just for the sake of making a statement. Remarkably, members of NIMBY groups frequently support renewable energy initiatives—they approve of biodiesel as an alternative energy source that does not harm the environment. However, when a biodiesel plant construction is proposed in their neighborhood, NIMBYs quickly organize into an opposition group. The society as a whole understands the necessity of clean renewable energy, nevertheless, in reality, virtually nobody wants to make their backyard available. Therefore, the physical proximity to a development seems to be the main criterion in NIMBY activity.

If your firm finds itself involved in a NIMBY fight, take the steps necessary to ensure the proper message is getting out to the public. Very often the opposition stems from misinformation and poor communication between project representatives and the community. In this case, it is better to play

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on the offensive. Instead of waiting for the opposition to grow, present the facts. Make sure community members understand how biodiesel works, how it is created and what advantages it brings to the community, the country and the world. Chances are local residents' knowledge of methanol use in biodiesel production is limited to the dangers of explosions and chemical spills. Your goal is to demystify the process. Explain safety procedures and protocols that will ensure the absence of health threat to the neighborhood. Explain the environmental and economic benefits of building your plant. These are a few basic facts you need to relay to the community.

The next crucial step is to look for local support and build allies in order to form a supporter coalition. First and foremost, you need to identify and create a database of local residents who are in favor, against, or undecided about the project. A good way to begin is to carry out a poll or a phone bank, inquiring local residents on their view of the renewable energy industry in general, and about your development plan in particular. The results of the surveys may then be published to showcase the positive attitude in the community toward your venture.

Once the database is created, it has to be maintained and updated frequently for the campaign management to be aware of the changes in the local opinion. One way to do this is through a targeted direct mail and/or advertising campaign. In addition, a strong social media campaign is a modern and necessary tool to spread your message, reach out to the community and provide supporters with a communication outlet.

Now that you have distinguished supporters from opposition, the next step is to reach out to third-party groups that support

your development. These groups could be anything from small businesses to a local decision maker. Those companies or groups who you have had a positive relationship with or will benefit from your project should be encouraged to participate in the campaign.

Residents should express their support through writing letters to their elected officials or newspapers. Those who are looking to support further can attend public hearings where they can speak about the benefits of your project. Most likely, an independent pro-group would have emerged by now and will actively participate in all aspects of the campaign.

You may choose to fight NIMBY on your own. However, experience shows that hiring a specialized firm will provide you with the necessary tools and tactics to ensure a victory for your development. Trained professionals from a grassroots firm will make sure that the correct message from your company is being distributed to the community and the silent majority is heard. The way you approach the situation will make all the difference.

When it came down to it, the CEO of that biofuels corporation had a decision to make. He could choose to ignore the NIMBY fight, avoid communicating with the local community and take the situation to an unnecessary level of tension. Instead the company's management team hired a specialized firm that 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, the permit was granted and the company went on to build the plant.

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