



# Controlling NIMBY

**P**icture this: the CEO of a large ceramics company wants to pursue an innovative product opportunity, and he decides to build a new production 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.

Almost immediately, the zoning commission holds off on granting their permit. Why? Nearby town residents of the proposed site have created an opposition group to fight the project. Despite the fact that the presence of the new plant would create new jobs, increase the tax revenue

and improve the local economy, 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 factory that operates with chemicals. The CEO soon realizes that opposition is indeed a road block that may halt or even destroy his project. What does he do now?

The problem this company faces is not so uncommon; it is called the "Not in My Backyard Syndrome" (or NIMBYism), which consists of strong opposition by one

► **"Not in My Backyard Syndrome" can cause opposition for business developments and projects.**

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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 positioned nearby that may potentially be dangerous to their health, or merely to their lifestyle and community vibe. Whatever may be their motivation, NIMBYs, as they are commonly termed, are very likely to organize quickly to communicate their opposition to a local project in an effort to curb development.

## A Little History

The origins of NIMBYism are somewhat vague. Some scholars believe the concept originated as early as the 1950s. However, the practice of communal opposition to development blossomed in the 1980s. During that time, community concerns were reasonable and justified in most cases. Although the history of ceramics can be traced back thousands of years, for the most part people are unaware of the processes involved in the production. Thus, the fear of the industry as the unknown was one of the reasons communities opposed these factories.

In addition, with the technology available during that period, building a plant in a neighborhood could mean noise, traffic and pollution. The equipment and safety protocols used in ceramics production were far less advanced than they are now. The risks of equipment malfunctions and exposure to chemicals were high. While those days are gone, the sentiment of opposition remains, as does the stigma of a chemical-based 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 seem to find a reason to oppose development. Very often, they are simply “in it to win it” and oppose just for the sake of making a statement. Remarkably, members of NIMBY groups frequently support development in general; they favor any projects that may improve the local economy. However, when a plant construction is proposed in *their* neighborhood, NIMBYs quickly organize into an opposition group. Society as a whole understands the necessity of building new factories, including those in the ceramic industry. 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.

### What Can You Do?

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 on the offensive. Instead of waiting for the opposition to grow, present them with the facts. Make sure community members understand how ceramics are made and what processes are involved. Demystify the process—explain safety procedures and protocols that will ensure the absence of health threats to the neighborhood. Explain that your facility will not, in fact, be a chemical site, but rather will use only controlled amounts of certain chemicals. Finally, explain the 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, identify and create a database of local residents who are in favor, against or undecided about the project. A good way to begin is by carrying out a poll or a phone bank, asking local residents their view of the ceramic industry in general and 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 be encouraged to 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 ceramics company 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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