

NIMBY—A Reporter's Perspective

The very first time I encountered the Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome was in 1975 in Eugene, Oregon. Employed as a fry cook in a not-so-fast food restaurant on the midnight to six shift, I spent my days trying to break into radio (KZEL-FM, album-oriented rock) as a local news reporter with an attitude. Aside from covering city council meetings and taping occasional interviews with visiting celebrities, I worked the neighborhood news beat documenting the activities of community groups in that small but politically active college town.

My first real story was about the proposed construction of a Bi-Mart supermarket and department store—a forerunner to the Price Club discount warehouse—in a residential neighborhood. I remember the developer as a classic villain who tried to build his store without benefit of a zoning variance; he was the kind of business owner who would glad-hand politicians with promises of jobs for the economically depressed community but then bring in a non-union construction crew from out-of-state.

He did not let me tape record an interview but smiled all the while through our discussion, denying any knowledge of community concerns about noise, heavy traffic flow or parking problems associated with his development. That was at 1 p.m. I soon found out from local sources that the Bi-Mart man had previously arranged a 2 p.m. meeting that same day with the neighborhood group to tell them he would fight at every turn their attempts to negotiate mitigations. Despite my impassioned denunciations of his duplicity—broadcast live at 2:45—the store was eventually built.

Five years later I was again doing neighborhood news, this time in Seattle for a daily public affairs feature carried by a half-dozen radio stations. In the corridors of City Hall, I can recall interviewing a woman neighborhood activist who had just delivered an impassioned speech against municipal efforts to locate a low-income housing project on her street.

The same issues—parking, traffic flow and preservation of neighborhood character—were what she raised against the project. By then I was sophisticated enough to recognize the real meaning of her code words; she wanted to prevent poor blacks from moving onto her block. In that instance, the neighborhood opposition was successful; the housing project was forced to locate elsewhere.

Both of these stories from the past are examples of NIMBY. I've encountered many others over the years but these two stand out in my memory, perhaps because of their perverse outcomes—at least to my perspective. On one hand, an honest effort by neighbors trying to maintain the integrity of their residential community was defeated by overriding commercial considerations. On the other, what I interpreted as a selfish attempt to scuttle a needed low-income housing project was successful because of political pressure adroitly applied by an ad-hoc obstructionist organization.

I resurrect these two tales as a kind of preface for what I intend to be a series of columns on NIMBY activism directed against power project construction here in California and in other parts of the West. Even with the current emphasis on energy efficiency as a way to displace prospective generating projects, there inevitably will be a need for “greenfield development” of new resources. And even with the competitive field tilted toward what might otherwise be considered politically correct renewable resources or natural gas-fired cogeneration, the market will witness continuing battles between

well-financed developers and well-organized community activists who would rather see the proposed facilities sited in somebody else's—anybody else's—backyard.

Certainly, no particular resource is immune to NIMBY opposition. A proposed wind farm near smog-bound Los Angeles was killed by neighborhood concerns over potential noise, visual impacts and supposed threats to the protected California Condor. The Crockett cogeneration plant went into developmental hiatus largely because of community opposition to the way it intended to store ammonia for its air emission reduction technology. About the same time, well-heeled neighborhoods north of San Diego managed to scuttle a proposed waste-to-energy project at the San Marcos landfill.

Not long ago, I visited the Puna geothermal project in Hawaii, which was unable to commence operations because of guerrilla warfare conducted by a small but sophisticated group of local residents. Those activists would rather live with power blackouts on a hopelessly overloaded utility system than allow commercial development of the geothermal resource along the slopes of the Kilauea volcano.

In each of these instances, environmental arguments voiced by concerned NIMBYists played a crucial role in the fight against development. I was struck, for instance, by the irony apparent in Hawaii. The people who slapped “Unplug Geothermal Power” bumperstickers on their cars in Puna appeared to be the same kinds of folks in my San Francisco neighborhood whose cars sport “Support Renewable Energy” signs.

Much has been written about the linkage of environmentalism and NIMBY activism, and many observers have reached the conclusion that while NIMBY opponents of a particular project may mouth environmental arguments, they do not truly accept broader environmental ethics. Their real concern is often the preservation of property rights and their own property values; but like the Seattle woman who opposed public housing in her neighborhood, NIMBY opponents will voice whatever arguments they can to attain credibility. And while they consistently portray themselves as underdogs in a fight against some big, bad developer, NIMBYists are able to recruit some very powerful allies--notably established environmental groups and members of the media who will always give time to covering “David vs. Goliath” stories--when they begin to espouse environmental arguments against their opponents.

Bob Kahn, a public relations consultant for some wind and biomass development clients, once sent me a copy of an address he gave to Washington State legislators that touched upon this linkage of NIMBY and environmental activism. “By their very participation,” Kahn said, “environmentalist support expands the opposition’s rationale and takes it to a ‘higher’ plane. A green-tinted NIMBY opposition is more powerful because it moves the argument beyond narrow self-interest.”

Nearly 30 years have passed since I started my professional reporting career, but I will admit that I now feel less able to judge the legitimacy of opposition to proposed developments. That is one difficulty of being trained to honor all sides of contentious issues. But the task remains: How to discover what really separates a self-serving NIMBY activist from a true environmentalist, and what a worthy project needs to do to overcome NIMBY opposition.

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