Overcoming the Challenges of NIMBYism

NORTH CAROLINA HOUSING COALITION

EDUCATING and ADVOCATING for CHANGE
The American frontier has been officially closed, and staking claim to a piece of land is not as simple as it once was. Inevitably, the proposed site for affordable housing will sit in someone's perceived backyard. Which is why almost all housing developments, whether public subsidized housing or privately developed market rate, will likely face some form of objection from someone at some point.

This section is designed to help you build community support and fight neighborhood opposition to proposed affordable housing developments in your community. It is a guide to understanding, preparing for and successfully overcoming the challenging phenomenon we call NIMBYism.

We believe the right planning and information are key to dealing with the NIMBY syndrome and that it can prepare you for a NIMBY reaction well before it becomes apparent. Included in this section are a discussion of the factors that create NIMBYism, research data that will help you dispel NIMBY fears, and best-practice examples for defeating NIMBYism.

Most of this information is compiled from the experiences and documents of organizations that share our challenges and goals and have dealt first-hand with NIMBYism. While we believe good planning can give you the shot at success, it should be noted that there is no "silver bullet" to prevent NIMBY opposition from ever preventing a development from getting approval.
NIMBY is most simply defined as an effort to stop the establishment of certain types of housing or service facilities within or adjacent to a specific community. It develops when a community group says it supports a project as long as it is built somewhere other than in its neighborhood. Typically, NIMBY opposition may sound like this:

“Our community should support affordable housing. Affordable housing serves many important human and community needs. Affordable housing in our community could be located in many places but Not Here!”

The reasons most typically cited are that there is enough “affordable housing” in this area and it needs to go somewhere else or it doesn’t fit in with the upper income nature of the community, will bring down property values and should go somewhere else.

NIMBYism involves more than just an attitude, however. It is a collective protest in response to perceived threats about the social character or the potential impact on property values of a proposed affordable housing development.

**Challenges and Obstacles Created by NIMBY**

Dealing with NIMBY opposition is a crucial aspect of developing affordable housing. NIMBY-driven concerns can be focused on a variety of elements associated with your project, including:

- The physical characteristics of the housing proposed.
- The assumed negative impacts of the housing proposed.
- Past experiences with the housing type and/ or the developer.
- The particular occupants of the housing proposal.

Typical NIMBY tactics may include:

- Circulating neighborhood petitions
- Writing letters to facility owners, politicians, and the media
- Lobbying elected officials
- Holding demonstrations
- Taking legal action
- Forming neighborhood opposition groups
You will undoubtedly find that a significant amount of public opposition to affordable housing is based on misperceptions and exaggerated fears about the impact of affordable housing developments on communities.

According to a document published by the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH) about dealing with opponents of housing and service developments, these fears include concerns about the type of facility to be built, how big it is, how many are already in the area, how it will be operated, what it will look like, and who will own and/or manage it. Unfortunately, fear is a powerful force. Fear draws on racial and, even more often, class prejudice. Fearful people feed on each other and spread their hysteria like a virus. It can unite an otherwise disjointed neighborhood against a common enemy.

“Those people will bring drugs and crime into our neighborhood!”
“The buildings will be ugly and run down!”
“Our property values will plummet!”

Fears related to affordable housing can be expressed in a variety of ways, some of them very subtle. Personal security concerns can be communicated as concerns about the operating procedures of the facility or as concerns about increased traffic, decreased parking and infrastructure problems. Opposition leaders will sometimes deliberately stir up fears in flyers and statements at community meetings to organize opposition. The media can inadvertently fuel and multiply fears by broadcasting unsubstantiated rumors and misunderstandings. Sophisticated opponents can even come across with a "caring face" when they express concern for the prospective residents of affordable housing as they describe certain neighborhoods as unsuitable for the target client group.

The good news is that many fears about affordable housing are based on lack of information or blatant misinformation. Contemporary affordable housing is not well-known among some decision makers and planners, much less the general public. Even more encouraging is the finding that there’s a base of potential support that can be tapped.

According to the Hart survey, 46 percent of respondents acknowledge that the lack of affordable homes for working families is a problem on par with issues such as overcrowded public schools and traffic congestion, especially for those with very low incomes or for young adults just entering the labor force.
While there are no silver bullets, here are five strategies which may be helpful to overcoming public fears of affordable housing. Keep in mind, however, that using these strategies requires time and resources as well as extraordinary patience, preparation and self-discipline. After all, it’s hard not to be adversarial when opponents treat you as the enemy. And being subject to double standards is infuriating—opponents’ factual allegations are likely to be assumed true until proven false, while developers’ statements, even with supporting facts, are almost always treated with suspicion.

In order to choose which strategies are most likely to work for you, it also is important to probe and analyze the sources of the fears. Are the fears based on personal experiences, second-hand stories, media images, purported factual studies or other sources? If there is a primary source, you can try to address it.

1. **Educate Thoughtfully**
   
   Many fears, e.g., that affordable housing reduces nearby property values, are based on lack of information or blatant misinformation. While bias and prejudice may not yield to facts, getting the facts out is an important and necessary step. Remember that contemporary affordable housing is not well known among some decision makers and planners, much less the general public, so some questions should be expected. Even when these queries are accompanied by a hostile tone, it’s best to calmly convey pertinent information or arrange a later time and place when it can be provided.

   Keep your facts accurate and well-grounded. Rebuilding credibility after getting caught in half-truths is difficult. Also, pay attention to who presents information, how and in what context. Often fears are paired with distrust of the developer. In this case, information will be more credible if communicated by other people or organizations. Facts that have already been publicized by education campaigns outside of the context of a particular development approval process are more likely to be believed.

   Education is more likely to be effective with decision makers and the media than with neighbors. To some degree, early education can inoculate decision makers from fears about issues that arise regularly; they may still respond to the fears from political reasons, but they won’t actually believe them. Early education of the media, including providing background materials on typical issues, may lead to useful investigative stories, reporting which includes references that question the fears, or at least stories which include the developer’s point of view.
But be prepared that just the facts may not be enough. With many people, factual information has no effect, or even inflames their fears. Repetition is important; people in the grip of fear and anger won’t hear things the first time they are said. Sophisticated opponents also may find apparently contradicting facts or hire their own “experts” to dispute your facts. Unfortunately, misinformation, once spread, is almost impossible to completely eradicate. Opponents may continue to repeat and spread misinformation even after exhaustive responses have been made.

2. **Humanize the Target**

Many fears are ultimately based on stereotypes of prospective residents. In some cases, meeting prospective residents can calm these fears by replacing abstract concerns with a human face and a compelling story.

*Housing tours and testimony at public hearings are two opportunities for introductions.* Of course, the longer and more deeply the prospective residents have been involved with the proposal, the more powerful their impact. Before involving a prospective resident in this work, it’s critical to warn them that opponents may treat them in a hostile and offensive manner, especially at community meetings when decision makers or the media are not present. Don’t forget to include neighbors of existing developments in your testimonies – their support can really change the “sky is falling” story put forward by opponents.

3. **Enlist Support From Trusted Authorities**

Reassurance about a development from a trusted and credible authority can help significantly. In some communities, a respected leader from local government, the faith community, business or local civic organizations will support the proposal in a letter, in public testimony or as a spokesperson to the media.

*These leaders often do need to be more educated on the issue and have their own concerns met before lending their reputation.* But if they are convinced, they can become highly successful advocates. For example, after researching the issue himself, one chief of police wrote a letter testifying that there was no increased crime associated with a developer’s previous projects. Leaders of the opposition subsequently dropped this issue from their arguments before decision makers.
4. Build Relationships With Opponents

Treat initial skeptics and questioners as opponents may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But building a relationship with former skeptics can turn them into very powerful allies.

Unfortunately, many people see a nonprofit affordable housing sponsor as an unskilled, incapable developer and the for-profit sponsor as just another unscrupulous, slick developer whose unlimited resources will be used to shove its project down the community's throat. Getting out from under this reputation is a prerequisite to effectively dealing with fears.

Some developers, especially community-based developers, view education and other strategies as part of building a relationship with the local community. The scope of this relationship may only extend to winning project approval, or it may extend to future cooperation in other community-building efforts.

Often building a relationship means listening to and acknowledging fears in a sympathetic manner without agreeing that they are factually valid and not blaming the questioner for not being properly informed. Sometimes a developer can earn trust by using its contacts to focus local government's attention on pre-existing neglected neighborhood problems that are now being used as issues to oppose the proposed development. Invitations to the developer's office and previous developments are common ways of establishing a relationship. During long delays, keeping in touch with opponents regularly may head off suspicion.

The goal is not becoming “friends,” but engaging opponents in a series of conversations and a consistent pattern of interactions, including making and keeping promises, so that, by virtue of actually knowing who they are dealing with, they will withdraw opposition and give your development a chance to demonstrate that common fears will not be realized.

5. Take Action When Necessary

In some cases, it is appropriate to revise a development proposal or to take other action to address fears (e.g., organizing a study, adding staffing or creating a review mechanism).
Sometimes the change is made to build confidence and to show that no basis for fear exists. Planning commissions and city councils may try to add unnecessary, burdensome and even illegal conditions in conditional-use permits in order to calm fears. Developers’ acceptance of such conditions is controversial. Even though the project will get built, the conditions may be used as a precedent against the next proposal.

While numerous laws, including fair housing law, prohibit discrimination against prospective residents, citing law directly as a response to neighbors’ fears is more likely to incite resentment than to improve the situation. The best role for working with the law in these cases is to challenge discriminatory local laws and practices used to educate and to persuade local government to prevent a violation of the law through carefully selected channels. Of course, if discriminatory fears cause violations of the law, developers, advocates and prospective residents should consider enforcement.

Remember: Some advocates strongly question the approach of attending to the emotional issues, such as fear, behind local opposition. In their view, these strategies may not work and may even backfire. And if it’s discrimination, why not just call it what it is?

Finally, it’s important to set reasonable expectations. Don’t expect to dispel years of accumulated fear or every opponent’s fear even by a combination of these strategies. You probably don’t need to. The goal should usually be to strip away legitimate concerns, focus on the issues properly before decision makers, and allow fearful and prejudiced opponents to reveal themselves as just that.
Well-planned operating procedures, a well-maintained and physically attractive structure, and an agency with a good reputation in the community will increase a development’s chances of being perceived as acceptable. But there are a number of proactive steps organizations can take to further reduce or even avoid community resistance. By anticipating likely public resistance and addressing it in a strategic manner, you can minimize the controversy, cost and delay of affordable housing and tame the NIMBY monster.

First and foremost, a strategic and proactive approach should be taken with community outreach. This includes identifying the various stages at which information is valuable, what kind of information is needed, and by whom. It is also essential to keep all players (government officials, housing providers and the media) up-to-date on new ideas and concepts in housing, aware of the changing demographics of their area, and informed about research on NIMBY cases in other areas.

Especially critical is getting organized locally -- controversial developments often require a groundswell of popular support that can only be won through sustained, active, local organizing. Local organization activities most relevant to potential NIMBY battles can involve some or all of the following:

- **A meeting with your elected officials.** A meeting with legislators when they are not in session is usually more effective. Taking a group with you will also grab their attention.

- **A tour of low-income areas.** This provides an opportunity both to demonstrate the needs of the community (i.e., more affordable housing) and to celebrate successful projects already under way (new developments or rehabilitation projects) with local officials and the media.

- **Documentation that demonstrates the need for low-income housing.** This should be information obtained either through a survey of local housing providers and available data that documents items such as how many households are on the public housing waiting list or how many households have no indoor plumbing. Deaths, illnesses and injuries in your community that are attributable to substandard housing or homelessness can also be documented, as well as examples of elderly persons suffering in the heat of summer without air conditioning, children dying in house fires caused by unsafe heating sources, and homeless persons dying on the streets. This also helps emphasize human suffering related to the low-income housing crisis. Such documentation should be shared both with elected officials and media contacts.
• **Document the economic development benefits of your housing development.** Housing creates jobs and local (as well as state) tax revenues. Calculate those numbers and publicize them. If you are working on housing for those in the work force, provide data on types of jobs residents of current developments are performing. It is also useful to show how average salaries of common and sympathetic service workers cannot afford local market housing prices.

• **Petitions about specific housing issues.** These petitions can be signed by potential housing residents as well as other interested persons and used as an opportunity to educate people about housing issues.

• **Public forums.** Forums give candidates and local officials an opportunity to state their positions on housing and poverty issues. Registered voters can learn more about candidates and follow up by casting educated votes. A candidate forum is also a valuable media event. (Note that there is a difference between a forum and a debate. At a forum, candidates deliver prepared speeches on a given subject. Hence, they may be more willing to speak at a forum than discuss ad hoc at a debate).

• **Voter registration drives.** These should be targeted especially in low-income housing developments and homeless shelters where voter participation is typically low.

• **Scrapbooks of newspaper and magazine articles related to housing.** This can include pictures of substandard housing in your community that are also used for slide presentations and newspapers. (Note that newspapers usually prefer black and white film to color). Organizations may also want to create an anthology of creative writing, photos and personal testimony from a person in a low-income housing community to include in such a scrapbook. An anthology offers numerous benefits to an organizer: anecdotal information can give a localized, often emotional bite to otherwise bland statistics; contributors to the anthology are provided with a forum for telling their stories and being heard; anthologies can serve as excellent fund-raising tools for a local organization.
A good recommendation for getting organized is to also become familiar with the **Community Reinvestment Act** and the **Fair Housing Act**, and how they relate to local financial institutions. Each financial institution receives an annual rating based on how well it serves diverse populations (geographic, economic) in a community. Local banks should be approached about how they support affordable housing efforts.

When it comes to fighting NIMBYism, the best defense may be a strong offense. Organizations that have successfully overcome NIMBY attitudes agree that with the right planning upfront, it is possible to head off NIMBY reactions before they emerge.

However, every local opposition conflict is different, so it isn’t feasible to use the same outreach plan for every proposal and then wait and see what will happen. It is necessary to develop a proactive and collaborative work plan at the beginning of each development, engaging in a “due diligence” process in which organizations work with local advocates to create a development team and make deliberate decisions about key areas that are important for the specific development proposal. These key areas typically include:

- Preparing a political strategy that coordinates all work towards getting the votes needed for approval.
- Preparing a strategy to build active community support for the proposal.
- Preparing a strategy to work through concerns of community members and to deal with active opposition.
- Preparing a strategy to protect and use all legal rights.
- Preparing a public relations/ media strategy to send messages to decision makers and the public. When it comes to fighting NIMBYism, the best defense may be a strong offense.

This kind of planning preparation usually requires two or more meetings of the entire development team together with local advocates. At the first meeting, the following types of issues are frequently assessed:
The organization’s reputation, capacity to attract broad community support for its work, and its previous experience in dealing with local government, opponents and the media.

What local government approvals are required, who will decide, what is the process and criteria for decisions, and an expected timeline.

Local government’s current knowledge of and support for affordable housing, the organization’s work and the current proposal.

Full analysis of the neighborhood surrounding the proposed site (history, problems, organizations, assets, etc.).

Likely concerns neighbors might have about the proposal, the neighborhood’s experience with similar problems and its potential for organized opposition.

Potential legal issues associated with the development proposal, including the organization’s and clients’ legal rights.

The regional and local media’s approach to the development and clients.

Second and later meetings are held to additionally determine strategies toward local government, potential supporters, potential opponents, legal issues and the media, staffing required to implement identified strategies; and any consequences for the proposal’s timeline, funding needs or site selection.

It is also important to distinguish this planning process from the adoption of a high-visibility entry with early notification of neighbors. Whether to notify neighbors (and, if so, how and when) is one of the decisions made during this planning process. In fact, all timing issues are critical and must be decided after consultation with persons most familiar with local politics and the relevant neighborhood.

There will be changes that occur throughout the course of a development which require organizations to improvise plans as they go along. But the original planning always helps manage the process and avoid some fire drills and surprises. It is also wise for organizations to continually draw on the collective experience of others to gain further insight into the strategies for community acceptance.

Of course, all plans will work more effectively if organizations have participated in ongoing, community-wide strategies to improve the political climate for affordable housing and services in your community, e.g., tenant organizing, voter registration, participation in the development of local housing policy, promoting pro-housing candidates in local elections and promoting the enforcement of fair housing laws.
Getting organized locally and planning outreach in advance of potential NIMBY reactions helps ensure that organizations are ready to defend a proposed housing development. But there are also many specific actions that organizations should take once a project is under way and NIMBY issues have become real.

Understanding what has worked for other communities is valuable, and there are a number of basic guidelines that will apply almost universally. But always keep in mind that what works for one community might not work for another because of differences in the communities, residents, elected officials and locations. Different projects require different treatments of the same functionality. One factor that holds true in almost every circumstance is that people must be kept well informed once your project is public. Effectively disseminating information so that each citizen can make individual informed decisions about affordable housing is essential. This will make it easier for everyone to learn about local housing issues from a reliable source.

Public officials should always be briefed first; followed by neighborhood leaders next (it is essential that these groups hear about the project from you, not second-hand). Meetings should be held in small groups, when possible, and organizations should have clear illustrative materials showing site plans, building design, floor plans, etc.; and clear management standards for resident selection to present.

Organizations also should try to visit all interested parties at roughly the same time in order to assure that everyone has access to the same information. It can be helpful to show photos and recommend visits to previous, successful, attractive, well-maintained properties during these meetings as well.

There are some common mistakes that organizations routinely make. It can be damaging to let print or electronic media do a story on your project before you have carried out all your briefings of neighbors and officials. It is also not advisable to meet with people in large groups of more than a dozen or so, as these meetings can become unruly or difficult to manage. Whenever possible, organizations should not meet in their office or in a public place. Meeting in individual homes is preferred.
Effective NIMBY Communications

Before you begin to sell the affordable housing you're developing, you have to sell the idea itself. Organizations that know how to communicate with honesty and intelligence and stick to the issues that count will ultimately win support for their proposal.

There are some advised goals for communications designed to overcome NIMBY concerns. These include neutralizing opposition and building active support where possible as well as motivating and enabling people to visit existing developments in or near their community. Accomplishing these goals generally requires communications to:

1. **Provide factual information on a limited set of issues (e.g., design, density, crime, traffic, parking), acknowledge controversy and present available facts on contested issues.**

2. **Provide a new perspective (e.g., mortgage interest deduction subsidizes most housing).**

3. **Build credibility and trust and create relationships for follow-up.**

4. **Multiply impacts of presentation (e.g., generate good media attention when possible).**

One of the most effective techniques to counter NIMBY concerns is to show particularly successful examples of affordable housing to emphasize the fact that opponents’ fears about affordable housing are simply not borne out by experience. The most important allies for you can be the neighbors of the existing developments.
Messages that could accompany such examples include:

- **A demonstration of how the development is a local community asset** (eliminates blight, provides local jobs, brings federal and state subsidies, addresses jobs/housing balance, generates sales tax revenues, reduces traffic/pollution, provides community amenities, etc.) with emphasis on the attractiveness and design of the development (if appropriate, note that it’s impossible to recognize the development at a glance as affordable housing).

- **An explanation of how professional property management** (including tenant screening and lease provisions) **prevents crime and protects neighboring property values** with emphasis on the fact that well-managed properties do not decline physically and that behavior problems are not be tolerated.

- **An overview of the successful results for residents of affordable housing developments** (e.g., educational and employment achievements) along with a listing of the broad range of types of qualifying residents; express need by typical jobs, (firefighters, policemen, civil servants, city and own employees).

Organizations should always try to localize images as much as possible and include before and after shots of developments and images of older buildings that are well-maintained and of people living in buildings as their home. These messages and themes should be repeated as many times and in as many contexts as possible. **The personal testimony of trusted and/or disinterested parties on local impacts such as neighbors, police, business, former opponents, good press and other authorities also will have a strong effect.**

The style and tone of your communications will equally have an impact. Organizations should acknowledge and address real concerns, but not attempt to oversell. Interesting, fun and creative presentations (e.g., guess which is affordable housing?) can put people at ease and reduce tensions. The language used is important as well. For example, the term housing “project” has notable negative associations; it is much more effective to use terms such as development, complex, apartment house or home.

**Another important strategy during a NIMBY conflict is to use communications to acknowledge mistakes in part and explain lessons learned and how they are being used to make improvements.** Organizations should additionally encourage positive action in their communications, such as suggesting a housing tour or providing links to local and regional resources.
Gaining the Support of Public Officials

Public officials play a key role in dealing with NIMBY attitudes, as they are typically the target audience for both the proponents and opponents of a development and hold the power to make decisions that may significantly affect the development’s success.

Ideally, most organizations will have already approached local officials and let them know how much they rely on their support in advance of the time when they cast their votes. During a tough NIMBY fight, it frequently helps to stake out the moral high ground and urge them to demonstrate the “courage to withstand NIMBY pressure.” It also helps to observe that advocates of the proposal will look favorably on supportive public officials.

**It is especially critical for an organization to have its own house in order before engaging with public officials during a NIMBY fight. If an organization or development does not perform as advertised the first time, there will probably not be a second time.**

Organizations should ensure that necessary steps to address any actual problems with existing affordable housing developments in the community have been taken and that there is documentation available that shows the actual impacts and benefits of affordable housing in the area. Public officials will expect affordable housing advocates to be able to succinctly and persuasively state the tangible community benefits of affordable housing.

Activities designed to network with officials and build support can play an important role. Organizations may want to initiate and support intergovernmental (e.g., city and county) and interdepartmental planning and collaboration on affordable housing, especially in procuring funding (e.g. support continued and additional state and federal funding as well as finding a local funding source). This may expand to include community partnerships and alliances among stakeholders (e.g., changers of commerce, environmentalists, faith congregations, etc.).
Organizations should also be able to demonstrate their knowledge of and support for local zoning ordinances, planning codes and housing policies, and know how they should comply with federal and state fair housing laws and how to promote affordable housing (e.g., streamline funding and land use approval process, identify and rezone sites for multifamily habitation, adopt density bonus and inclusionary zoning programs, etc.). The establishment and enforcement of professional management policies and standards through regulatory agreements and management plans may also be issues that are addressed. Finally, organizations should help clarify for officials and their colleagues that concerns about broader, previously existing problems that require the jurisdiction’s attention (e.g., overcrowded schools, insufficient public services to a neighborhood) should not warrant denying the proposal. They should also ensure that discriminatory information is not taken into account in decision making and that discriminatory conditions are not applied in order to mollify opponents.

**Managing Controversy at Public Hearings**

During a period of controversy before a public hearing, organizations can support the affordable housing developer and advocates by constructively engaging opponents and working through legitimate concerns. They can also make resources available for neutral mediation where useful and stand up to opponents who are acting in bad faith or discriminating.

If controversy is expected at a public hearing, organizations can request that the jurisdiction’s legal counsel brief the decision-making body on legal issues involved, especially anti-discrimination law. Groups should also set (and enforce) ground rules for a civil, reasoned discussion focused on legitimate, substantial concerns and solutions to community problems.
Going into any battle unarmed will certainly guarantee an unsuccessful outcome. Fighting the NIMBY battle is no different. The following section is designed to ensure that you have some of the necessary material to support the planning of your NIMBY efforts.

This toolkit is a step-by-step how to guide for organizing and conducting a campaign to work through NIMBY challenges in your community. We have provided communication tools as well as planning information, strategies and exercises.
Don’t try to convince each person of the total truth and righteousness of our cause in every conversation. Do remember our goals: to provide information, to present a human face to begin a dialogue and relationship.

Don’t reflexively answer each question with your stock response. Do listen to the question’s nuances, paying attention to the questioner (body language, tone, demeanor). Take time to think about your response if necessary. Probe the questioner if you suspect there’s something behind the question. For example, “Does your concern/question come out of a particular experience you’ve had?”

Don’t try to give “facts” that you are not sure about. Do acknowledge the query as a factual question that you’ll need to research to find out more information. Promise to get back to the person and be sure to follow up.

Don’t try to contradict the questioner’s own experience of local opposition to a particular development. Do put the experience in context. Acknowledge that you aren’t familiar with all of the facts of that situation. Acknowledge that developers (like everyone else) do make mistakes sometimes.

Don’t present yourself as an expert on every issue related to affordable housing. Do explicitly acknowledge the complexity and long history of the field. Allow yourself to say, “That’s a good question. I don’t know the answer now.”

Don’t refer vaguely to all developers or all developments. Do speak from your own experience and about particular developments that you know.

Don’t claim that every affordable housing development is well-designed, professionally managed, contributes to the neighborhood, and works perfectly. Do acknowledge that the affordable housing movement has learned many lessons over the past decade, including the importance of good design and quality management. Acknowledge that not all developers have the same level of experience, expertise and funding to do everything they and the community might want them to do. Explain that groups like yours are continually trying to improve the work of housing developers.

Don’t let the education stop with one presentation. Do encourage elected officials at every opportunity to go on a housing tour as the best way to understand affordable housing.
Keep Focused on the Goal
Getting local government approvals for a good proposal is the goal—it does not entail making everyone happy. The two are somewhat related, but not the same. Note: In this sense, community acceptance is confusing.

Assess the Threat
Who is articulating this concern? What is their political power or potential to keep you from getting approval because of this concern? Don't spend an inordinate amount of resources or time responding to concerns that are not likely to be consequential.

Determine Appropriate Response(s)
Through careful listening, conversation and other research, try to figure out to what degree is the basis of concern primarily (a) an honest factual issue, (b) based on fear, or (c) hiding another different issue (and, if so, what?).

A. If the concern is primarily factual, consider the following responses:

- Provide most relevant property value studies.
- Get testimony from an informed realtor and/or appraiser familiar with doing property value studies.
- Show the concerned neighbors your budget (and sources of funds) for property maintenance, your management plan and other information to demonstrate that you will be a responsible property manager and neighbor.
- Demonstrate that your proposal and program are based on best practices or best models and incorporate lessons learned from other similar facilities (e.g., that the plan tracks advice from “Transitional Housing: A bridge to Stability and Self-Sufficiency, Best Practices in Program Design and Deliver”—Home Base, 1998).
- Do a new property value study of potential effects or show the enclosed summary of property values studies for your particular housing type.
B. **If the concern is primarily fear**, consider all of the above responses AND:

- Try to build a respectful, honest and professional relationship with the concerned neighbor.
- Get testimony from a realtor who is informed about the issues and trusted by the concerned neighbor.
- Conduct a housing tour of similar existing residences and talk with other peer neighbors.
- Keep distinguishing between current fears and whether or not the fears are substantiated by facts and are likely to be realized.
- Remember: The key issue about fears that are not primarily based on lack of credible relevant information is that the person usually needs reassurance from a trusted authority.

C. **If the concern is primarily something else**, you will need to consider and/or try all of the above and during this process make an effort to smoke out the underlying basis for concern/opposition.

- Pay attention to the neighbors’ responses to what you present. Are they consistently unwilling to accept/credit any credible, relevant genuine factual information? Do they somehow always identify new and additional issues of concern?
- Document all your actions, conversations and interactions with the concerned neighbors.
- Consider your political and legal options.

While making responses to concerned neighbors, be sure to keep elected officials and staff (especially supportive and potential swing individuals) informed about how you are attempting to meet the concern. Don’t stop creating and building active support for the proposal and always consider how your supporters may assist you in this work. Finally, prepare to address this issue when responding to questions from reporters.
The Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH) has developed a useful process tool for proactive and collaborative planning that has been successfully employed to help organizations overcome NIMBYism in the San Francisco Bay area over the last several years. Its process consists of five steps to guide the development of specific strategies with a clear plan of actions: who will do what, when, how and with whom.

### Step #1: Prepare a political strategy.

- Get to know your local government's players and relevant policies. There are “key leaders” in every community, but they don't always have the same jobs or titles. To find them always ask: “Who else should I talk with about this?”

- Identify solid supporters, committed opponents and uncertain votes on your proposal.

- Determine education and advocacy efforts needed to keep supporters, neutralize opponents and win uncertain votes.

- Coordinate your efforts with supporters, concerned community members and with the media to get the votes you need.

- Document everything and tell your best story at public hearings. Usually something like: “We’re a professional, community-based group with significant community support meeting a critical need, and we’ve done everything we can to respond to neighbors’ legitimate concerns.”
Step #2: Prepare a strategy to build public support.

Active, vocal community support for your proposal will help you get political support, counter your opponents, tell your story to the media and, when appropriate, say hard things that developers usually do not want to say.

- Develop solid support for the proposal (at least in the broader community) before contacting potential opponents.
- Don’t fall in the trap of spending all of your time and energy responding to opponents.
- Identify and prioritize actual and potential supporters, including tactical allies. Think widely about your potential allies.
- Plan recruitment of supporters and what you want them to do for you.
- Organize and support your allies with background information, housing tours and up-to-date information.
- Mobilize supporters at critical points (e.g., using a database and tax sheets).
- Keep them informed and encouraged.

Step #3: Prepare a strategy to work through issues.

- Notification and community outreach decisions should be designed to surface and deal effectively with legitimate concerns and for positive presentation of the proposal, not to create an open forum for opponents to organize themselves against you.
- Consider alternative methods for community outreach (e.g., door-to-door canvassing, open-house forums or small house meetings) instead of the large, open community meetings.
- Use an issue-based strategy for working through local community concerns.
- Find out the probable basis of their concerns before fashioning a response (e.g., misinformation, fears about impacts, expectation to participate, legitimate conflicts of interest, prejudice or issues unrelated to your proposal).
- Prepare appropriate responses to each kind of concern (e.g., education, reassurance by trusted authority, appropriate forum participation, negotiation, clarifying legitimate from illegitimate issues.)
- Peel away layers of opposition and their issues to leave only “unreasonable” opponents.
Step #4: Prepare a legal strategy.

- It will be essential for you to identify the legal rights of your organization and your prospective tenants/clients and learn how to spot potential legal violations.

- If your proposal is likely to encounter illegal discrimination or raise complex legal issues, contact legal assistance immediately to learn what you should do now to protect your rights and how and when to get further legal assistance.

- Work with legal advocates to identify how to protect and assert your legal rights without litigation, e.g., educating the city attorney early in the process.

- Keep records of all statements, fliers, etc., that may be evidence of discrimination.

Step #5: Prepare a public relations/media strategy.

Before you get any media coverage on a proposal, decide if you want to generate media coverage (proactive strategy) or if you want to be able to respond effectively to any media coverage you receive (reactive approach).

- Designate and prepare spokesperson(s), including former clients and supporters.

- Develop your message(s) and alternative stories for your target audiences (e.g., decision makers).

- Prepare brief, easily faxable fact sheets about your organization, the proposal, your supporters, your efforts to resolve legitimate community concerns and other information to support your message(s) and alternatives stories.

- Follow up on any coverage you receive with thank-yous and corrections.

- Develop ongoing relationships with media (to the degree your resources allow).
Some organizations may wish to prepare for a fight against NIMBYism before an actual development is on the horizon. The NPH has also come up with a series of small-group exercises that can prepare team members to carry out the real tactical planning quickly when a real development is at stake.

These exercises use fictional scenarios to help organizations assess their strengths and weaknesses in generating active community support for the organization and/or a potential development proposal. They also prompt internal brainstorming on how to use your strengths and heal weaknesses, and suggest repeating the process for relationships with local government, local community and media.

There are five sets of exercises that correspond to the planning process tool. Three fictional scenarios have also been provided to facilitate creative group problem-solving work.

To use these exercises, each organization should ask participants to read through the scenarios and then role-play the exercises as a group as outlined, drawing on the information provided in the scenarios (e.g., the “Political Environment” and “Media Environment”) to guide the improvisation. A team member with some experience in conducting or participating in workshops of this kind might volunteer to facilitate the training.
Planning Exercises

Exercises for Planning and Assessment:
Using either a scenario or each participant’s own organization, assess your organization’s strengths and weaknesses in generating active community support for your organization and/or proposal. Brainstorm how to use your strengths and heal weaknesses. Time permitting, do the same for relationships with local government, local community and media. Debrief.

Exercises for STEP #1: Political Plan:

Educating/advocating with elected officials:
Divide the group into two parts, one group will be local elected officials/staff people (identified as either potential supporters or unknown positions) and the other group will be representatives of the developer and identified supporters (e.g., businesspeople). Developer group has 10 minutes to prepare for a meeting with elected officials in which developers will try to get buy-in for its project from the elected officials. Preparation can include deciding who to bring, what to bring, what to say, who to say it, etc. Then the groups role-play the meeting together for 10 minutes. Trainer will give additional facts to elected officials while developer group meets to prepare meeting with elected officials. Debrief.

Political intelligence:
In small groups, brainstorm ways to identify where decision makers might stand on your proposal. Then brainstorm ways to influence their opinion. Debrief.

Exercises for STEP #2: Building support:

Prioritizing potential supporters:
Using the scenario, do a preliminary support plan. Prioritize the first three potential supporters you would contact (core supporters), how you would approach them and what you’d ask them to do. Be creative and work the “six degrees of separation.” Next, identify two other potential sources of support that you’d approach if you have time and what you’d like them to do. Debrief.

Using supporters:
Trainer (or other group acting as opponents) tells the small group what we’ll do to oppose your proposal. Small group then determines how to use its identified supporters to deal with opponents’ actions. Debrief.

Exercises for STEP #3: Dealing with community concerns:

Struggling with key predicaments:
Using the scenario, in small groups decide the following in 15 minutes: (1) if/when to notify and who to notify (in what order), and (2) whether, when and how to do additional outreach (e.g., canvassing, house meeting, community meeting, open house, etc.) Debrief.
Listening exercise:
In groups of two with roles assigned by trainer (one as representative of the developer and one as neighbor), role-play an initial conversation about the proposal for 5 minutes. The goals are for the developer representative to identify the neighbors’ primary concerns and think of how to address them. (This could also be done in a “fishbowl” format.) Debrief.

Exploring the arguments:
Using scenario, in two groups (developer and supporters in one group, neighbors in the other) role-play discussion of neighbors’ issues (property values, crime, etc.) for 10 minutes. (If time allows, groups switch roles and see how the conversation differs.) Debrief.

Exercises for STEP #4: Legal plan:

What is discrimination?:
Brainstorm what opponents and/or local government might do or say that may be discriminatory against your proposal under federal fair housing law. Debrief.

Using the law:
Brainstorm ways that the developer and advocates could use pro-affordable housing laws to advance the proposal short of litigation. Debrief.

Exercises for STEP #5: Media plan:

Preparing the message:
Using scenario, developers and supporters decide on two to three messages about the proposal and how they will support them to create a positive news story, including assigning roles to spokesperson and other potential interviewees. Debrief.

Getting the message out:
Role-playing a reporter, the trainer interviews one or more of the spokespersons and other potential interviewees to see if the message gets out. Debrief.

Responding to bad press:
Trainer informs small group of a bad (inaccurate and biased) story just published; small group brainstorms how to respond. Debrief.

Final Exercise: Prepare for public hearing:
Divide into three groups: (1) developer/supporters, (2) opponents and (3) decision makers. Each group meets for 10 minutes to prepare for public hearing. Role-play public hearing for 10 minutes. Debrief.
**Planning Scenarios (optional)**

**Scenario #1— Developer: Affordable Housing Advocates (AHA)**
Affordable Housing Advocates was founded 10 years ago by community organizations for the purpose of developing housing for low-income families in Tri-Area County. Since then, AHA has completed five projects, including two rehab and three new construction, and won two design awards. In part because of its emphasis on hiring only planning school graduates as project managers, AHA has developed a solid reputation as a professional developer in Tri-Area County where most of its developments are located.

Some developments have received community support; others have been opposed at public meetings. The staff of seven is comprised of an executive director, financial manager, housing director, two project managers and two clerical/bookkeeping staff. The board of directors includes an attorney, two social workers, one resident of low-income housing, two congregation leaders, one homemaker and three local business people.

**Proposed Development and Neighborhood Context**— The proposal is for new construction of an 80-unit complex with mostly three- and four-bedroom units located in the Mission District, a middle- to upper-income neighborhood of New City, which is about 20 miles outside of Tri-Area County. Units will be rented to lower-income families who may access limited supportive services on site. The service program has not yet been fully defined, but may include a large community room and a computer-learning center. A group of religious sisters owns the site, which is part of a larger parcel where their headquarters and retirement residence are located. They want to sell the land to produce revenue for caring for retiring sisters, but want to have the land used for a noble purpose. The Mission District neighborhood has an active chamber of commerce and “neighborhood watch” signs around it, but it is unclear how organized it is. The neighbors are particularly proud of and involved in their high-quality public schools.

**Political Environment**— This proposal would fulfill priorities identified in New City’s adopted housing plan. The project requires city approval of a conditional-use permit. Some planning commissioners and city council members have supported low-income housing development, while others have expressed concerns about property values, crime and “projects not fitting into the neighborhood.”

**Media Environment**
The local newspaper, owned by a regional media outlet, tends to emphasize community conflict. There has been some coverage of housing problems, but little about affordable housing developments.
Scenario #2—Developer: Community Advancement by Shelters for All (CASA)

CASA was founded five years ago as a local community development corporation for the purpose of developing housing for low-income families in Suburbia, North Carolina. CASA has completed two developments, including one rehab and one new construction. In response to the need for service-enriched housing among homeless people, persons with HIV/AIDS, persons with mental disabilities and others, CASA recently began partnering with local social service providers to offer on-site and off-site services to residents. Each of CASA’s developments has been opposed at public meetings, but has eventually won approvals. The staff of seven includes an executive director, services coordinator, housing manager, two project managers and two clerical/bookkeeping staff. The board of directors includes one attorney, two social workers, three residents of CASA’s existing developments, two congregation leaders, one homemaker and one local businessperson.

Proposed Development and Neighborhood Context

Rehabilitation of a 20-unit complex located in a mixed neighborhood of working-class residential and neighborhood commercial (retail and offices) of Suburbia. The site is currently occupied by an unused apartment building, which CASA will substantially rehabilitate. Units will be rented to mentally disabled women with families who may access limited supportive services on-site and additional services off site by a van. The service program is not yet fully defined but will include case management, counseling, training and job search assistance, and independent living skills. The proposal does not require state licensing. Some of the local businesses are struggling to survive. The neighborhood has “neighborhood watch” signs around it, but it is unclear how active it is. There is one group home for developmentally disabled children and one job training program in the immediate neighborhood.

Political Environment

This proposal would fulfill needs identified in Suburbia’s approved housing plan. The planning department informed CASA that it will require a conditional-use permit either under Suburbia’s “boarding-house” classification or as a “group home.” Some planning commissioners and city council members have supported low-income housing development, especially for seniors, while others have expressed concern about overburdening certain neighborhoods with “public housing,” which they perceive as social service facilities.

Media Environment

The local newspaper tends to emphasize community conflict. There has been little coverage about housing. One of CASA’s project managers used to work as a reporter with a regional newspaper called The Guardian.
Scenario #3—Developer: St. Vincent De Paul (SVDP)

In response to the rise of homelessness in the early 1980s, St. Vincent De Paul, a Roman Catholic service organization, opened a homeless shelter and dining room in the downtown commercial area of Upscaletown, North Carolina. The shelter provides beds and minimal services for 30 individuals per night, and the dining room serves about 200 meals per day. Since its opening, the staff and volunteers have been single-mindedly focused on providing services to their clients. The staff of seven includes an executive director (who recently replaced the former executive director), dining room manager, shelter manager, two volunteer coordinators and one clerical/bookkeeping staff person. The board of directors includes two congregation leaders, two social workers, one resident of low-income housing, one professional photographer/artist, one homemaker and one local businessperson. The volunteer base of more than 50 residents of Upscaletown includes mostly congregation members but also some family members of prominent city leaders.

Proposed Development and Neighborhood Context

For the last three years, Upscaletown has been engaged in a “downtown revitalization program.” SVDP has been publicly blamed for crime, vandalism, aggressive panhandling and other blight in the immediate neighborhood of the shelter/dining room, and for creating a “magnet” drawing homeless people to Upscaletown. The city manager of Upscaletown has been pressuring SVDP to move out of the downtown area because the site is scheduled to be redeveloped for retail use. Most of the neighborhoods outside of downtown do not provide public transportation to downtown. Any relocation would require a major conditional-use permit as well as funding to rehabilitate/remodel the new site.

Political Environment

Some planning commissioners and city council members have supported low-income housing development in the past. Relations between the elected leaders of Upscaletown and the former executive director had soured over this period. While the new executive director has attempted to negotiate with the city manager about alternative sites for relocation, there never seems to be a site which the city and SVDP can agree on, in part because SVDP wants to remain located downtown where it can be accessible to its clients. Recently, the city manager has told the executive director that if SVDP doesn’t move of its own accord, the city will begin eminent domain proceedings against it.

Media Environment

The local newspaper has publicized the city’s complaints about SVDP without much comment or response from SVDP. There has been some coverage of homeless problems, but little about successful solutions to homelessness.