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INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Overcoming NIMBY Opposition to Developing New Affordable Housing

Dr Tony Gilmour | Elton Consulting



KINETIC WHITE PAPER SERIES {4}

Introduction

Developing any type of new property in an existing neighbourhood is fraught with difficulty. Local residents often express a whole series of concerns about falling property prices, lack of parking and change to neighbourhood character. If the development is to house higher needs social housing tenants, the NIMBY opposition can become extreme. Community housing providers, who are relatively new entrants to the development business, need to learn a fresh set of skills and approaches if they are to supply the new housing we urgently need.

This paper provides an introduction as to why people oppose new affordable housing developments, giving insights based on approaches used in Australia and other countries. It aims to be practical, finishing with a checklist of key areas to consider when planning a consultation process. Although NIMBY opposition can appear daunting, it is a common problem around the world and there are various free resources that can make like easier.

Kinetic White Papers provide an overview of key issues facing the community housing sector to stimulate debate and help decision making. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

KEY POINTS

- NIMBY opposition is based on a series of deeply held beliefs, some rational and others emotional.
- The planning system is important in overcoming opposition. Community housing providers need to cultivate good relationships with Councils.
- The types of opposition to new affordable housing change over time, and responses need to be tailored accordingly.
- It is helpful to build a coalition of support for affordable housing development projects. There is strength in numbers.
- There are a number of easy steps that can be followed to help engage with development opponents.
- Large public meetings can be a recipe for disaster. Try and use smaller and more interactive sessions, making direct contact with opponents.

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About the Author

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Tony's doctoral research at the University of Sydney compared approaches to expanding the community housing sector in Australia, the US and Britain. Field research in these three countries gave him first-hand experience of NIMBY opposition to new affordable housing schemes.

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Know your acronyms

As Australia tries to address major housing affordability challenges, resistance to developing new lower-cost housing in existing communities is a growing phenomenon. Indeed, opposition to new housing development of any type has become so pervasive that it has spawned its own vocabulary. There is the NIMBY syndrome (Not in My Backyard), there are CAVeS (Citizens Against Virtually Everything), and at the extreme end of the spectrum - BANANAS (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone).

As the example in the box shows, NIMBY opposition to new residential development is not new. It is particularly associated with a move to higher density, higher rise dwellings in existing suburbs. The popularity of this type of building form over the last half century has been driven by both the potential for higher profit by the developer, and a lack of affordable land on the urban fringe of many capital cities.

More recently State Governments have promoted 'smart growth' by concentrating new developments within the existing urban footprint, close to jobs and transport. This is achieved by developing brownfield sites, formerly used for industry, and greyfield locations which are in urban areas and currently used for commercial, retail or lower density residential purposes. More smart growth means more neighbourhood opposition.

The particular focus in this White Paper is overcoming opposition to new *affordable* housing. 'Affordable housing' is used in as an umbrella term to capture a wide range of housing types. These include public and community housing aimed at very low income households or people with high and special needs, as well as National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) properties targeted at low and moderate income earners.

Whereas post-war affordable housing tended to be clustered in estates built on the edge of the city, from the 1970s these began to be seen as areas of concentrated disadvantage. Similarly, high-rise inner city estates have become criticised for lacking social mix. Therefore the 20,000 new affordable homes built through the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Package, and the target 50,000 NRAS homes, tend to have been built in existing residential neighbourhoods. And at higher density than the broad-acre estates of the past.

Understanding NIMBY concerns

NIMBY opposition reflects the concerns of neighbouring residents that their lives will change for the worse. Sometimes these concerns are real and rational, based on a measurable impacts. More often, they are based on stereotype and anxiety about the new residents or the properties they will live in. Whether based in reason or emotion, however, opponents' views are generally deeply held. Both the rational and emotive arguments must be taken into consideration by affordable housing developers.

Resistance to new affordable housing developments tends to be based around a familiar set of concerns that can be grouped under three headings:

- **Financial:** the new scheme might lower property values. This could be because the new properties are cheaply built, making the neighbourhood less attractive to purchasers. Alternatively

IT'S THIS OR THIS!

CHESTER HILL, REVESBY
& SEVEN (7) OTHER SUBURBS IN BANKSTOWN

URBAN VILLAGE OR URBAN DISASTER?

it's your choice

SAY NO TO COUNCIL & THE STATE GOVERNMENT

YES TO... SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT... SYMPATHETIC TO THE LONG TERM RESIDENT

VOICE YOUR CONCERNS
AT COUNCIL'S INFORMATION EVENINGS
TUE. 2nd. & WED. 3rd. FEB. 7pm.
CHESTER HILL SENIOR CITIZENS HALL
(OPPOSITE LIBRARY)

NIMBYs at work in the early 1970s. Bankstown Council, community groups and the unions opposed higher density dwellings permitted by the State Government. Source : Bankstown Historical Society.

property values might be thought to fall as a result of the other concerns listed below. This is despite most research from the US suggesting that the property value of neighbouring private housing does not fall (see example in text box).

- **Social:** there will be undesirable people moving into the neighbourhood who will pose a threat to personal security or engage in anti-social activity. These issues are more prominent when certain groups are seen as likely residents - people with substance abuse issues, ex-offenders etc. There are often feelings that the nature of the area might change with the influx of new types of people, perhaps on lower income or from a different ethnic background.
- **Amenity:** more people in the area could place a strain on neighbourhood resources. There may be a concern about a lack of car parking spaces, increased traffic congestion or a shortage of school places. These are the types of objection most commonly encountered during the planning process, as they are seen as neither selfish (based on property prices) nor prejudiced (based on fear or loathing of particular social groups).

'Single-family home values in the neighbourhood of [affordable housing projects] are not adversely affected by their proximity to those projects. Indeed, in some cases, home values are actually higher the nearer the home is to [such a project]'

Paul Cummings and John Landis 'Relationships between affordable housing developments and neighbouring property values'. University of California at Berkeley, 1993.

It is worth remembering that NIMBY opponents of any type of new housing - affordable or market rate - will raise 'financial' and 'amenity' concerns. 'Social' issues tend to be raised more as a problem when the development is promoted by a public or community housing provider. However, 'social' issues can also be faced by private sector schemes promoting lower cost accommodation through boarding houses or student accommodation.

Why the planning system matters

The planning system can be used as a weapon by either the supporters or opponents of affordable housing. It all depends on the planning rules used in the state and council area where the new affordable development is located. To illustrate the uses and abuses of planning, it is important to remember that there are two broad kinds of opposition to new affordable housing:

- On the neighbourhood level there can be actions by local residents who oppose specific projects. Actions can include calls to local officials or talk-back radio, speaking out at public meetings, writing letters to newspaper editors, organising community groups or even picketing the proposed site
- At local government or state level, opposition can be woven into the fabric of planning rules and regulations. The term used in the US is 'exclusionary zoning' where planning rules such as strict design standards and preventing multi-unit developments are used to keep prices high and retain 'exclusivity' in a neighbourhood. These rules can be influenced by public officials, politicians and civic leaders who are susceptible to the type of lobbying mentioned above.

To be effective, affordable housing supporters need to address both these areas. Most efforts tend to be devoted to fighting battles (first point above) rather than changing the rules of engagement (second point). It is important for the community housing sector to lobby councils when they are reviewing planning policies.

Several larger councils, particularly in capital cities, have developed comprehensive affordable housing frameworks. Port Phillip Council in Melbourne not only set up a housing association and adopted supportive planning policies, it even commissioned research in 2009 to show other councils how to overcome NIMBY opposition (see reading list).

At state level, South Australia has led the way with their 2005 Housing Plan setting a target for 15 per cent of all new significant developments to be affordable, including five per cent for those with high needs. In other states such as NSW without strong leadership or policy directives on affordable housing, councils lack a clear framework for setting planning control policies that allow new affordable housing development.

Learning for experience

NIMBY opposition to affordable housing is characteristic of developed countries, with well document examples from Britain, Canada and the United States. However, approaches to dealing with the problem depend on the country's planning system.

In Britain, leadership in planning is centralised and it is standard for each council to have a policy requiring a certain proportion of new housing developments to be available for affordable rental or sales. Therefore housing affordability is hard-wired into the planning system, and objectors generally need to take on the council, not just the housing provider.

In the United States, planning rules are set by councils with little intervention by the state. To over-come what are in some wealthy areas often highly restrictive exclusionary zoning ordinances, broad coalitions are often formed. An example is given in the text box of Marin County in San Francisco. Two nearby employers' organisations, the Bay Area Council and the Silicon Valley Business Group, take a strong leadership role in supporting new affordable housing. This is in part due to their problems attracting staff as housing is so expensive. Businesspeople attend contested planning meetings, arguing lack of affordable housing is damaging regional economic competitiveness.

The coalition approach has also been used in Canada. For example in Ontario the HomeComing Community Choice Coalition is a coalition of housing providers, planners, human rights lawyers, advocates for people with mental illness and members of the public. The organisation produces a useful toolkit, listed at the end of this White Paper. This is the type of document we need in Australia, tailored to our planning and policy environment.

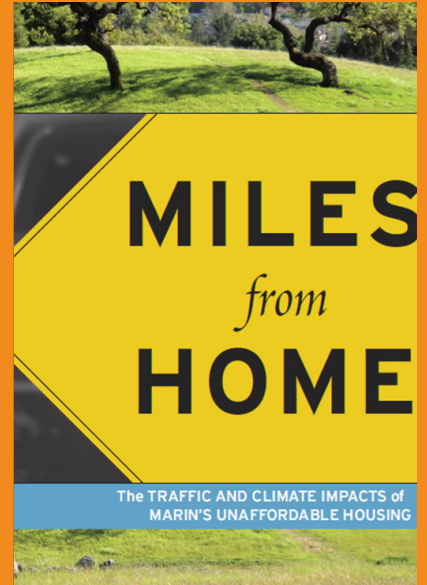
In Australia there has been only limited research on NIMBY opposition, apart from a helpful study of Melbourne affordable housing projects. Although the majority of the Melbourne schemes proceeded to completion, there were a number of problems faced by community housing providers. Some of these problems were made worse by less effective approaches to community engagement.

Building a coalition of support

In 2011 the Marin Community Foundation and the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California launched a 'miles from home' campaign.

This aims to persuade Marin County, a local government area north of San Francisco, to change their planning laws to be more supportive of affordable housing.

The campaign appeals to the wealthy Marin residents' concerns about environmental issues, as well as their need for local hospitality and care support staff.



Analysis of opposition to 14 Melbourne affordable housing projects
(City of Port Phillip, 2009)

- Most opponents were property owners living very close to the proposed schemes. Often the projects were in neighbourhoods 'coming up in the world'.
- Financial, social and amenity concerns were raised. However, the main fear was about crime and safety issues based on perceptions of the type of tenants to be housed.
- Just over half of the Melbourne projects were in areas where the Council had an affordable housing policy. Councils supported 12 of the 14 projects with 'councillor leadership and resilience was important'.
- Consultations normally involved formal public meetings with presentations by experts. These were sometimes sabotaged by 4 or 5 people. Where statutory planning meetings took place, objectors were normally allowed 3 minutes to speak with no opportunity for dialogue.
- Successful lower-key consultation events were held by Yarra Community Housing and Port Phillip Housing Association. These involved smaller and more interactive pre-planning consultations, design workshops and displays in the local library with staff and experts on hand to answer questions.

Community Engagement and Community Housing

Lessons and practical strategies for Local Government for responding to contested community housing proposals



Report prepared by Mandy Press for the City of Port Phillip - July 2009

NIMBY issues

As has been noted earlier in this White paper, NIMBYs base their opposition to affordable housing development on both reason and emotion. Both issues need to be dealt with, but in different ways:

- **Factual issues** can be addressed through supplying information, particularly if produced by respected independent organisations.
- **Emotional issues** are best dealt with by having someone trusted by the opponent speak on the affordable housing developer's behalf. Having a member of the clergy or business community as a supporter may allow the message to be heard more effectively. Also conducting a housing tour of other similar properties, and giving opponents a chance to talk with neighbours can be effective.

There is a complex inter-play of factual and emotional issues over time. Based on the 2009 Port Phillip Council report, the chart on the following page shows how the battle lines develop and change.

In phase 1 emotions run high, and debates revolve around quite local concerns. By phase 2, factual issues are more important although the debate becomes more complex with more stakeholder groups involved. By phases 3 and 4, fewer people are involved and the debate may shift in unexpected directions.

During phase 3 of the process, project sponsors often engage in negotiations with opponents to resolve conflict. The development scheme could be modified to remove the real or perceived threat to community interests. For example the building might be reduced in size, or the target group changed to lower needs tenants.

Unavoidable negative impacts might be reduced through the incorporation of mitigation measures, such as employing an on-site caretaker or manager. It may be possible to appeal to opponents' positive interests by offering counter-balancing benefits such as a new day care centre open to the general public, or funding improvements to a neighbouring park.

Phase 4 is important, though often overlooked. Even though the property is built and tenanted, careful management is required. Otherwise word will spread, and there will be greater NIMBY opposition to the next affordable housing development project. It can help to put in place a Neighbourhood Protocol, establishing how the project will be managed long term, and detailing how neighbours can raise nuisance issues.



How to communicate

Many tactics designed to convey information to the community can generate greater opposition than might already exist to a new affordable housing project, so a community relations program should be as sharply focused as possible.

A tremendous amount of opposition to new development projects is based on misperceptions or an exaggerated fear of project impacts. Opposition based on misinformation is a relatively easy type of resistance to overcome. Project sponsors are generally best relying on direct communications through newsletters, fact sheets and websites. This approach can be backed up by direct one-on-one briefings to educate people about the proposal.

Unfortunately some project sponsors and many council officials believe that most efficient way to educate the public about a proposed project is to host a large community meeting. However, enormous public meetings are one of the least effective ways to reduce opposition arising from lack of information. Large audiences usually have too many issues to address in depth, and time is

constrained so people become frustrated because they cannot fully express their concerns. At their worst, large meetings do little more than introduce opponents to each other, allow them to hear and adopt each other's agendas.

Supplying information is not a magic cure-all for all community resistance. If opposition is not based on misperceptions or lack of information, too much public information can backfire.

It can stir up people who were otherwise uninvolved in the debate, validate vague fears, and notify people of new issues to be concerned about. Supplying information without seeking a response can be seen as patronising and one-sided. It is better to stress how much you want to hear from neighbours and listen to their fears, concerns and suggestions.

Meeting the emotional needs of NIMBY opponents is an important part of any community outreach campaign, and can be substantially less expensive than making concessions later on in the process. While it is always important to treat neighbours with respect, it is especially important to do so when controversial development plans are being discussed. For example, respect their intelligence by encouraging them to review technical documents and confirm for themselves that the conclusions are correct.

A practical checklist

Community housing providers are relative newcomers to the development process. Raising funding, obtaining planning consents, appointing builders and engaging with the local community can seem daunting tasks. Several professional firms can - for a price - help with these activities, including managing NIMBY opposition. However much can be achieved by community housing organisations following a few easy steps listed below:

- Aim for a great **working relationship with councils** in the locations where you operate. Encourage councils to adopt an affordable housing strategy, and then tailor their planning system accordingly.
- Build a broad **local coalition** in favour of affordable housing projects. Have good contacts with councillors, business owners, contented tenants, community leaders and celebrities who can be brought out to support your development projects. Your board of directors are often an excellent source of contacts and practical support.
- When a new project has been identified, establish a **strategy** to gain community support. Do not make up approaches as you go along, rather plan carefully and allocate responsibility to a senior member of your management team.
- Adopt a consultation process based around **direct contact** with opponents, both one-to-one meetings or at small events and information sessions. As shown in the example from Melbourne, large public meetings are seldom successful.

Consultation gone wrong

A Victorian housing association proposed developing a medium density affordable housing scheme in Kew. Some prospective tenants might have a history of mental illness, others would be families with children with physical disabilities.

Two public meetings were held, with up to 100 people attending. These were described as 'quite ugly' and adversarial, with objectors not allowing project proponents to speak, and there were many interjections. The subsequent statutory planning meeting was no better, with objectors yelling and disrupting the meeting. One objector stating that he didn't want to see 'paedophiles living next to the school'. The Project Director was physically assaulted during this meeting by one objector.

Based on doctoral research by Thomas Alves at Swinburne University, 2007.

- Treat NIMBY objectors with **respect**, and as individuals. Most objectors will be relatively wealthy, educated and articulate. Be prepared to listen to their views, and take on board some of their ideas on the design of a project. In some cases they may have a better knowledge of local issues than your own staff. Try to treat NIMBYs as a resource, not a threat.
- Pre-prepare a range of **brochures and information sheets** about your organisation. Do not assume the locals will have heard of your organisation, or even understand what a community housing organisation is. Most will still think of you as the 'housing commission'. You need to emphasise that you are an independent charitable organisation directed by a board of local people who know the area.
- Gain credibility by demonstrating the **previous projects** you have completed. Show that they are well built and well run. Encourage NIMBY opponents to visit the schemes on an open day, and ideally talk to neighbours to show that new affordable housing projects do not cause major problems. 'Converts' - neighbours who once opposed affordable housing in their neighbourhood, but have been won over by their experiences - can be your most enthusiastic and credible supporters.
- Be **realistic** in describing what types of people will be housed. Not all affordable housing projects can be targeted at nurses and fire-fighters! If tenants have higher needs, show that they will be supported. There will be less NIMBY opposition if you can show that the new affordable accommodation will be for people who already live in the local area. Many residents fear an influx of 'outsiders'
- Put in place a post-occupancy **Neighbourhood Protocol**, giving the name and phone number of a tenancy worker who can resolve any nuisance issues. This provides a more personalised service, unlike when the landlord is a State Housing Authority or a private corporation.

Overcoming NIMBY opposition toolkit

A Canadian coalition in favour of affordable and supported housing produces and updates a toolkit to assist housing providers. See reference at the end of this White Paper.



Further reading

City of Port Phillip (2009) *Community engagement and community housing. Lessons and practical strategies for local government for responding to contested community housing proposals.*

HomeComing Community Choice Coalition (2005) *Yes, in my backyard. A guide to Ontario's supportive housing providers.*

The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania (2004) *Addressing community opposition to affordable housing development. A fair housing toolkit.*