

Urban Land

Essay: Riding the NIMBY Dragon

“If you ignore the dragon, it will eat you. If you try to confront the dragon, it will overpower you. If you ride the dragon, you take advantage of its might and power.” This Chinese proverb describes a modern-day dragon called NIMBY (not in my backyard) activism. Retail developers who ride the NIMBY dragon will overcome a far greater threat than any NIMBY activist group could ever impose.

Every day, retail developers encounter NIMBY opposition in cities and towns across the country. News media regularly paint the NIMBY activist as the fabled David taking on the mighty Goliath. The hero in these news stories is the middle-aged, upper-income homeowner who opposes big boxes, pillboxes, and development fitting other concrete-jungle labels to protect his or her quality of life. Goliath is a profit-driven chain of retailers called Wal-Mart, Home Depot, CVS Pharmacy, or Target, or another retail-chain developer.

But if one looks past the media hype, another story unfolds: the NIMBY industry is the true Goliath, and retail developers are the hapless underdog. Every day, retail developers endure the barrage of assaults from the NIMBY industry that produces:

- community petitions;
- negative publicity;
- theatrical and hostile public meetings;
- misrepresentation of projects;
- mobilization of an angry public;
- costly concessions;
- lawsuits; and
- political rejection of land use applications.

NIMBY activists operate with no budget, no office space, no public relations consultants (usually), no media training, and no experts. It is not so much

the sophistication of the NIMBY industry that gives it the edge, but more the absence of best practices on the part of retail developers.

Typically, when a sign of NIMBY activity begins to surface, developers simply ignore it. In other cases, they may attempt to attack the credibility of the opponents, cry property rights, or blame the activists for the conflict. As the Chinese proverb warns, ignoring or confronting the dragon will result in being publicly devoured in the eyes of the community.

“NIMBY scenarios happen when there’s an absence of public relations. Retail chains rarely identify groups or build relationships, so they’re largely responsible for creating NIMBY conflicts,” explains Thomas Roach, a communications professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, who counsels homeowners on how to fight retail development. “Retail chains are very easy to oppose because they’re not a part of the community, have no relationships or civic presence, and they mostly neglect third-party input.”

Traditionally, developers rely on bureaucratic notices, ineffective public hearings, and untrained professionals to reach community stakeholders. Often, when the NIMBY dragon raises its head, developers are caught off guard, which results in a visible and vocal minority swaying elected officials and derailing real estate projects.

NIMBY activists gain the upper hand well before the first public notice is issued. Retail developers without a NIMBY public relations strategy often find themselves reacting to community conflict, responding to negative press, and defending their own reputation.

Public relations to pre-empt NIMBY threats is not new; NIMBY public relations integrates public affairs, community and media relations, and political marketing. It offers developers a less expensive, more effective, and far-reaching way to win community and political support. But a public relations strategy cannot be designed

without an understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, and motives of groups that can foil political objectives. Once potential NIMBY factions are identified, a public relations plan can be designed that is active and responsive throughout the approval process.

The NIMBY dragon has at least four heads representing the four different types of NIMBY activist—Guardian, Crusader, Machiavelli, and Watchdog.

The Guardian is responsible for most community conflicts experienced by retail developers. Guardians are the defenders of the status quo and the quality of life that they believe defines their community. They are mostly civic-minded homeowners who take pride in their community and make time to participate in their homeowners associations, civic groups, and other community activities.

Guardians surface upon learning about a new development through community gossip, government notices, or newspaper headlines. The Guardian perceives new development as a threat to property values, and as the cause of traffic congestion and generally anything that disturbs the status quo. With few exceptions, the Guardian—fueled by scanty information, misperceptions, and faulty communication—is motivated by fear of change.

The Guardian is usually a first-time NIMBY opponent who becomes a factor as the public hearing approaches. The sooner the Guardian is reached and heard by the developer, the better the odds for consensus and resolution, which in many cases is mutually beneficial.

The NIMBY Crusader views himself or herself as a champion of a cause rooted in the belief that the environment or the character of the community must prevail over economic progress. Unlike Guardians, who are motivated by fear of change, Crusaders are motivated by their own moral beliefs and the need for self-promotion. Most Crusaders are environmental-



ists, conservationists, or preservationists who believe the cost of development is too high. Crusaders are interest groups that represent dues-paying constituents who want to see motion, which is spurred by news headlines, grass-roots lobbying, and public conflict.

The Crusader carries the flag of NIMBY in part to protect the status quo, but also to promote the organization (or the individual activist) in order to enhance political clout, fundraising, and membership drives. Crusaders see retail development as providing not only an opportunity to claim the moral high ground, but also to raise their own profile.

This leads to the third type of NIMBY activist—the Machiavelli. NIMBY Machiavellis are politically motivated and adept at exploiting community anxieties to promote their own ambitious agenda. They seek to maintain their media profile so they can vie for a seat in the next local election or some other high-stakes event.

Machiavellis reside in every community and sometimes are former Guardians who enjoyed basking in the media spotlight and seeing their name in the newspaper. In other cases, a NIMBY Machiavelli is

a Crusader who is a first-time candidate or a self-appointed “throw-the-bums-out” citizen activist who has run for office in the past.

The NIMBY Machiavelli usually leaves his or her fingerprints on the community and should be identified as part of a developer’s effort to prevent inflammatory voices in the wilderness from reaching the media. It is worth noting that elected officials appreciate a developer who preempts and manages Machiavellian agendas, giving them the cover they want from these political nuisances.

The NIMBY Watchdog is the local government reporter assigned to cover public meetings. Conflict sells newspapers and television advertising, and the news media is primed to showcase the next David versus Goliath battle. The media typically favors NIMBY causes because the homeowner is not only perceived as the underdog, but also because the activist contacts the press first, creating more bias against the developer.

The four-headed NIMBY dragon can also form hybrids or coalitions that are mutually beneficial, exasperating the approval process.

Identifying the potential hot spots in the community by conducting opposition research is one initiative of a two-pronged public relations campaign. The retail developer also is identifying and establishing relationships with influential people in the community. These people represent an important intersection of business, government, and society. According to authors Ed Keller and Jon Berry in their 2003 book *The Influentials*, one of every ten citizens is an influential person, and retailers who have not secured these prized surrogates are walking a tightrope without a net.

These movers and shakers operate under the radar, but they are everywhere: citizen advisory board members, civic volunteers, publishers of community newspapers, presidents of homeowners associations, religious leaders, homemakers, homebuilders, chamber boosters, former elected officials, and patrons congregating at the local barber shop. In times of change, swing voters seek out these opinion leaders who offer reliable information about what is going on now and what is to come. These are the elders of the community who are unlikely to be swayed by emotional arguments and who see beyond the rhetoric laid out by NIMBY factions.

Retail developers expect their land use consultants—lawyers, engineers, planners, and brokers—to reach out to influential people, but there are aspects of NIMBY public relations that go well beyond the training and expertise of these consultants.

A NIMBY activist’s primary goal for killing a land use project is not to intimidate elected officials with hundreds of demonstrators at public meetings—although that can be impressive—but rather to destroy the retail developer’s credibility. That credibility is the primary target of NIMBY gamesmanship because without credibility, a big developer is left with an Enron image, questionable studies, and few political allies. When retail developers overlook public relations, they not only antagonize the NIMBY dragon, but also alienate potential allies in the community and forfeit political capital.

More than 80 percent of NIMBY conflicts can be considered to be the result of misperceptions, lack of information, or community gossip. This offers retail developers an opportunity to prevent NIMBY fires before they begin. Retail developers can secure social capital during the early stages of the planning process by reaching out and implementing a public relations approach.

A recent report in the *Miami Herald* about Home Depot shows how a lack of NIMBY public relations can produce a Goliath. The story, titled “Home Depot Not Welcomed,” told how 80 residents gathered to oppose a Home Depot proposal before it was even formally submitted to the city. The homeowners hired Al Norman, author of the 1999 book *Slam Dunking Wal-Mart* and a self-proclaimed sprawl buster who was profiled on *60 Minutes*. A Home Depot spokesman was quoted far down in the article as saying, “We are still evaluating all the options on the property.” It was not clear in the news report whether Home Depot ever knew it was up against Norman, but what was clear was that the retail developer had not evaluated the community, thereby creating a fire-breathing

NIMBY dragon in the media. The Home Depot spokesman also said, “It’s better to talk to people than to ignore them.” This is true, but talk is cheap without a public relations strategy that fills the void currently being exploited by NIMBY activists.

Roach warns retail chains to do a better job. “Every organization has four constituents: investors, employees, customers, and communities where they do business. It is the latter of the four that is typically ignored and where the NIMBY phenomenon is born.” It is the community that grants the retailer the license to operate. Some retail developers are implementing forms of public relations, but as shown by the daily deluge of negative publicity, they are in the minority.

The best NIMBY story for a retail developer is the one that never happens. NIMBY public relations offers a top-down, bottom-up solution that builds community bridges, saves money, and increases the political odds for retail developers to ride the NIMBY dragon.



—Patrick Slevin, is a NIMBY public relations expert, consultant, author, and speaker. He is a former mayor of Safety Harbor, Florida and he completed *The Program on Negotiation* at Harvard Law School on *How to Deal with an Angry Public*.

Patrick Slevin’s unique knowledge of NIMBYism combined with his public relations experience offers his clients cutting-edge solutions for overcoming community opposition to real estate projects.



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