

ICSC FL Conference

Panel: Act early to avoid anti-growth sentiment

By Robert Pitts

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KISSIMMEE - The United States is quickly becoming a BANANA Republic when it comes to the growing anti-growth sentiment that would have us Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone, but community opposition to a development project can be avoided if leading members are engaged very early in the process, a panel of experts said at the ICSC 2008 Florida Conference in Kissimmee.

The secret, they said, is to be honest about the scope and impact of the project, garner support from small groups of affected residents, and seek

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to influence those who influence the local decision-makers.

Involving consensus-building experts early in the process - even before a site is acquired - can save developers valuable time and money later, the panelists said.

NIMBYs (Not in My Backyard) differ from BANANAs and CAVES (Citizens Against Virtually Everything), said Drew Newsom, manager for The Saint Consulting Group in St. Petersburg. NIMBYs are often easier for a developer to deal with because, for them, the proposed project is a locational issue. They are directly involved and have specific concerns, he said.

BANANAs and CAVES, on the other hand, oppose new development on principle, Newsom said. It's usually a small group of people, he said, but they have to be countered by enlisting help from community groups that support the project and can provide political cover for the local decision-makers.

Activity by these three groups often results in a local political leader hearing about a proposed project before the developer can present it, said Amy Maguire, managing partner for



Patrick Slevin



Amy Maguire

Southern Strategy Group in Tampa.

The extensive professional team that any developer has should include consultants who can work to build project support at the

grassroots level, she said, adding it should be someone who can build relationships with elected officials and city/county staff members.

For Newsom, the process of garnering support involves staying in the background and influencing those who influence the decision-makers. It happens through small, simple meetings over coffee - likely involving no more than two or three people at a time.

"If we do our job right, you won't even see us on the ground," he said.

Likewise, Patrick Slevin, president of The Slevin Group in Tallahassee, likes to go to the brain trust or "kitchen cabinet" of elected officials. But political consultants are all too often called in a bit too late - when the NIMBY "genie" is out of the bottle and building support becomes much more difficult, he said.

Lately, the NIMBYs have been going BANANAs, and when that happens there's usually a political agenda

involved, Slevin said.

NIMBYism stems from a broken notice and hearing process at the city and county level, Slevin said. Public notices tend to appear too late in the development process, catching the community by surprise and leaving the developer vulnerable to the effects of negative public opinion.

That negative slant can be perpetuated by the local media, Slevin said, which tends to love a David vs. Goliath story pitting ordinary citizens against supposedly big, bad developers.

Outside political consultants specializing in development issues are often more valuable than their local counterparts, Slevin said, because:

- Local political consultants may lack expertise in the development process.

- They specialize in polarization not consensus.

- They may have divided loyalties. Newsom said his team can be a supplement to any local efforts, helping to put out NIMBY fires before they begin.

Half of NIMBY conflicts could be avoided if companies would simply make local activism a part of their corporate philosophy and planning process, Slevin said. The trend toward infill development makes interaction with the community all the more critical, he added.