



THE SECRETS TO NEUTRALIZING NIMBYISM®

Cover Your Grass-Roots – Part I of IV Part Series

(Patrick Slevin, March 27, 2008)

This four part series will reveal secrets to neutralizing an out-of-control NIMBY syndrome that is spreading across North America.

Part I will reveal common applicant mistakes, miscues, and misunderstandings in combating anti-development activism. In many cases, applicants are not defeated by powerful community opposition tactics, but rather, they are out maneuvered by an unconventional foe. Part II will get under the hood of NIMBY activists. To know your opposition's motives, messages, and methods is to know how to neutralize them. Part III will show you how to go about constructing your grass-roots strategic plan and program. You will learn how to play from the center of the board and dictate your engagement. Part IV will address "how to" quarterback your grass-roots operations. Knowing how to execute a pass, run, play-action or punt is key to unconventional maneuvers, which you won't want to miss.

PART I: GET YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER

Have you ever had an elected official tell you, in private, that she will vote affirmatively for your project, but then publicly torpedoes your application? If so, there's a good chance it could have been avoided had you covered your *grass-roots*. Did staff love your site plan and recommended approval, but then the elected body rejected it unanimously? If so, it's likely the final vote could have been an affirmative majority had you covered your *grass-roots*. Did you ever hold a town hall meeting, but have it hijacked by NIMBY activists? If so, you could have certainly avoided crisis had you covered your *grass-roots*.

Grass-Roots Lobbying

Community outreach is often considered synonymous with grass-roots operations, but in reality, outreach is just one of many aspects in a grass-roots campaign. Community outreach is to grass-roots, as advertising is to marketing. Marketing is the overarching communications platform that underwrites advertising, public relations, corporate social responsibility, web communications, internal communications etc.

Grass-roots lobbying, as I like to call it, acts much like marketing, by directing several key communications disciplines: public relations, media communications, issues advocacy, political marketing, crisis communications, coalition building, and community outreach.

Therefore, community outreach is just one of many specialties that can help secure the political capital needed to protect and promote your project. To assume community outreach is the only arm of grass-roots engagement only weakens your ability to neutralize NIMBYism.

Rise & Fall of Town Hall Meetings

More developers and land use professionals acknowledge third-party engagement helps minimize the risk of community opposition. However, conventional outreach methods repeatedly fail, and in many cases empower the opposition. For example, 90 percent of applicants kick off their community outreach effort with a town hall meeting. On the surface this seems like a good first move appealing to several stakeholders: elected officials who are seeking political cover, reporters who want more education on the project (yeah right), and

anxious homeowners' who harbor status quo fears.

Can you guess what typically happens at these high-profile, high stakes public venues? You guessed it. They become media spectacles created by NIMBY activists who hijack the meeting. NIMBY activists attack these public venues with lightning speed, ease, and little cost. On the other end, the applicant stumbles away politically bloodied, bruised, and now in crisis mode.

Operational Blind Spots

Developers are big risk takers, risking big dollars to get a big payoff. Success is sweet and over time, it can breed poor operational attitudes, which is PC for ego and arrogance. I know what you're thinking, "Slevin you just ticked off numerous potential clients with this last sentence." Maybe so, but to defeat anti-development activists today, we need to eliminate internal weaknesses, something I look for when meeting prospective clients. Arrogance creates operational blind spots that telegraph weaknesses to NIMBY activists who are adept in exploiting them.

Arrogance is based on successes that have come with prior approvals meeting little or no resistance, so the mantra is, "let's keep riding the wave." However, these waves are crashing at public hearings, where the developer and his team are blindsided by the vocal minority. Poor operational attitudes ignore, overlook and underestimate third-party voices. The results are political ambushes that cripple projects. NIMBYism is like termites, it's not *if* you are going to be attacked, but *when*.

Those developers who put their egos in check will greatly improve operational due diligence and overcome their blind spots.

Legal & PR/Grass-roots

Land-use lawyers are retained to lead the application process because of their legal acumen and their political relations. They are on a first name basis with mayors, commissioners, and bureaucrats. They counsel the client and secure a majority vote.

As that majority vote gets harder to secure, the better lawyers will facilitate some aspects of outreach by brokering meetings between the client and the elected officials, and in some cases community leaders.

Top-tiered lawyers understand that the increasing frequency and viciousness of NIMBY attacks have created a need for specialized grass-roots skills that extends beyond their experience and scope of work. These top-tiered attorneys, (and I have worked with some of the best), realize that an experienced grass-roots consultant complements their legal efforts, doing the work they are not trained to do, do not want to do, or simply do not have the time for.

Localized PR/Political Consultants

An increasing number of developers and corporations are embracing the idea of conducting proactive community outreach. That's good. When they decide to hire a consultant to help with outreach, they typically retain a local PR/political consultant. The consultant presents traditional PR/Political credentials, and in many cases offers good relations with local elected officials. That's not always good.

You are asking, "So what's the down side, Slevin?" There are several. Political consultants are adept in polarizing and wedging voters with negative campaigning; where combating NIMBYism requires the ability to build coalitions and mobilize opinion leaders. Public relations consultants are unfamiliar with the notice and hearing process. The majority of them could not tell you what DRI or LDR stands for. Most consultants see community outreach as direct mail, letter writing and bussing 100 bodies to city hall. Local political consultants do not want to tick off their elected clients. They need them for the next election cycle, and rarely will they push the official(s) hard to vote against a visible and vocal minority.

Notice & Hearings Favors NIMBYism

In today's internet world, a bureaucratic notice posted on a property to inform the public about the developer's project is simply archaic. If anything, the notice only serves to feed a community grapevine electrified with gossip

mischaracterizing projects. Yet, many applicants ignore the consequences of the notice and hearing system.

How can the process benefit NIMBY activists? The notice and hearing system is a closed conventional mechanism. It is legal, logical and linear. Third-party input is confined to three-minutes and regulated by an egg-timer. NIMBYism on the other hand, is an open, unconventional process, which is political, emotional, and non-linear; requiring only a cell phone and a laptop computer.

Public hearings are the “Holy Grail” for showcasing NIMBY activism. Activists have the elected officials trapped on the dais, they have a room of angry voters kicking and yelling, and they have a happy reporter writing the David vs. Goliath story, which supercharges their political attacks.

Where the applicant follows the legal rules of the closed system, NIMBY activists operate outside these “rules” using those closed rules against the applicant with great effectiveness. It’s not fair, but then again who said combat was fair?

Get in the Political Loop

NIMBY activists know which elected officials are up for re-election. They have reporters and editors on speed dial. They infect the community grapevine with inflammatory rhetoric that effectively builds anxiety and anger toward the applicant. In many cases, they have spies who know, “who is saying what to whom”, at city hall.

The opposition is in the loop and tracking the political pulse at city hall and the community. Why aren’t you? Political intelligence is the “mother’s milk” for any project and conventional methods no longer work. A political SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) assessment gets you back in the game. When a developer does not conduct a political assessment, he is essentially forfeiting the political high ground, or at the very least, leaving the gates unlocked for the activists to storm.

We will go into greater specifics in Part III on how to use a political assessment to design your grass-roots strategy. Suffice it to say, you need to create new channels to reach city hall. For now, accept the fact that meeting with public officials and writing checks for their war chests are no longer enough to neutralize the opposition.

Conclusion

Getting a project approved is an expensive undertaking for applicants, and NIMBYism only compounds the costs with delays, concessions, and lawsuits. One project can cost millions of dollars in fees for lawyers, planners, engineers, economists, mediators, and marketers. The cost for a grass-roots operation is relatively nominal and the ROI in securing political capital is very high. Yet, the majority of applicants still roll the dice, trust the notice and hearing process, and announce they’re hosting a town hall meeting.

Applicants need to take immediate steps to overcome these weaknesses. Once that happens, then we can begin our campaign to neutralize anti-development activists in their own *backyards*. Congrats! You’ve just taken your first step in your NIMBY Warrior™ training.

Note from the Author

If you did not receive this column from me directly, then you received it from a colleague. If you want to ensure you receive Part II of this IV part series, please forward your name, email and comments to pslevin@slevingroup.com. We appreciate any referrals to colleagues who you believe would benefit from our specialized public relations/grass-roots services.

About the Author

Patrick Slevin is an award-winning, nationally recognized public relations consultant and speaker, presenting over 12 years of experience in winning high profile, controversial public campaigns. Mr. Slevin, a former mayor of Safety Harbor, Florida, is founder of the Slevin Group, a public relations/public affairs practice headquartered in Tallahassee, Florida. He can be reached at Ph: 850.906.9888, Email: pslevin@slevingroup.com.