

# Winning Votes with Community Affairs

By Patrick Slevin

Community opposition is one of the most costly aspects of development and many exciting real estate projects never get beyond the planning stage because of neighbors screaming NIMBY (Not In My Backyard). Once you've stirred up NIMBY opposition, you can expect negative media coverage, defensive communications, and expensive setbacks caused by apprehensive elected officials fearing voter

revenge on Election Day.

It's the community often with the active encouragement of advocacy groups which has emerged as the force that grants a company's license to operate. Builders unable to understand this repeatedly run into trouble, in some cases with painful and costly consequences.

The key to securing community support and winning the votes of local-elected officials is designing a community affairs program.

Community affairs isn't rocket science, but it does synergize the best of community relations with public affairs.

Community relations is an image builder, but its primary benefit is not only establishing good-will perceptions, but acquiring intelligence regarding community

dynamics and key relationships that can empower your public affairs efforts.

When we talk about public affairs, we're talking about grassroots lobbying also known as community outreach. Opportunities exist to effectively neutralize the opposition's ability to disrupt, delay, and defeat your project. To confidently manage activists, you have to first gather intelligence about the community's history, reputation, economy, prior conflicts, and media attitudes.

Talk to the folks in the planning department, find out from staff the stakeholders in the community who may oppose your project and who may be supportive. You should also do a political assessment of the elected officials themselves: discover their political alliances, campaign supporters, and voting record.

Once you have profiled the community, you can begin carrying out a grassroots campaign to build a coalition of supporters, advocates, and surrogates. Your coalition will be comprised of key opinion leaders, government officials, and other community gatekeepers who can be called upon to represent your project to the media, city officials, and the electorate.

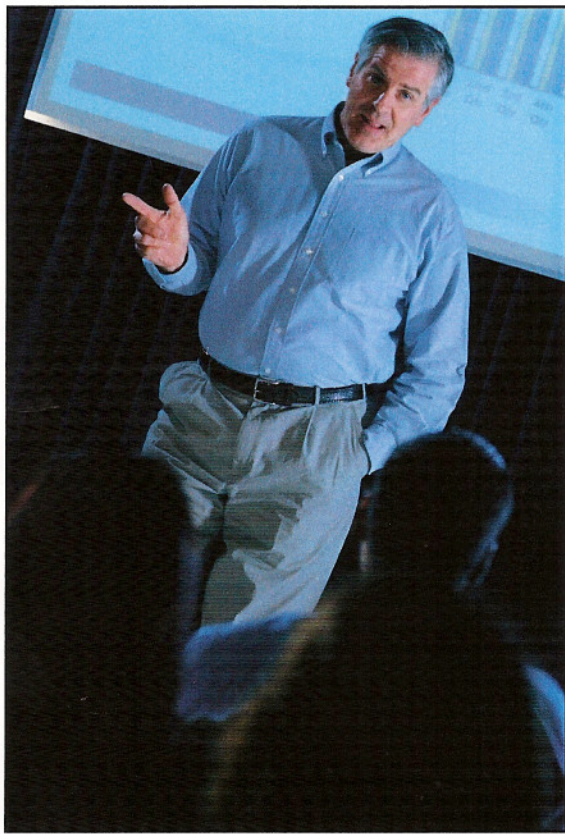
This stable of allies can be effective in letter writing campaigns, testimonials, letters to the editor, and one-on-one lobbying to influence officials and other opinion leaders.

The most important thing to remember about conducting a community outreach effort is creating impressions of being proactive and demonstrating to government officials that you're doing everything you can to build a consensus in the community.

Most community leaders agree that the first hurdle and biggest obstacle to developing any new project is the attitude of the community. If you can identify potential activists who would be opposed to your project, you can then attempt to understand whether the reasoning behind their NIMBY attitude is logical or rhetorical.

Information on a community's dynamics helps you decide on how to educate the public, preempt the opposition, and generate favorable impressions that positively influence media coverage and political decision makers.

The builder who can disseminate intelligence, profile decision makers, and launch community outreach campaigns has the greatest chance of winning the heart and soul of the community, not to mention the votes of its elected officials.



**Be proactive and demonstrate to government officials you're doing everything you can to build a consensus in the community.**



*Patrick Slevin, a former mayor of Safety Harbor, Florida and founder of Smart Growth Solutions, specializes in grassroots public relations consulting developers, associations, corporations and governments. His unique knowledge of NIMBYism combined with his public relations expertise offers his clients cutting-edge solutions for overcoming community opposition to real estate projects.*



For Information go to [www.SmartGrowthSolutions.org](http://www.SmartGrowthSolutions.org)