



Partnership for SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Sustainability vs. NIMBYism

Can Sustainable Features Help Win Support?

There's no question that more people are thinking about sustainability.

When housing development manager Michael Massie goes to a city with a project proposal, the first question he gets asked is how much does it cost. The second question: What sustainable measures are you taking?

Massie works for the nonprofit Jamboree Housing Corp., which believes in building sustainable projects for environmental reasons. But developers are finding that sustainability helps when making the case for a project before city officials and the public. Although the response varies by community, many are excited by the idea of a green project, says Massie.

This brings up a big question: Can sustainability help win zoning battles and overcome public opposition and long and costly obstacles for affordable housing developers? While Massie and several other developers say yes, other experts say no.

Sustainability Sells

Residents at Granite Court, a new affordable housing development in Irvine, Calif., have more than new apartments. They have jobs within walking distance, easy

access to public transportation, and even a little more time in the day, thanks to decreased commute times.

The community is in the heart of the burgeoning Irvine Business Complex (IBC). Several years ago, the area was primarily occupied by light-industrial businesses, but the city has been focusing its recent development activities in the IBC with the idea of bringing together business, retail, and residential uses in the same area. The goal is to create a live/work environment while reducing traffic congestion and pollution.



Developed by Jamboree, Granite Court is the newest addition to the IBC.

The idea behind Granite Court and the IBC is sustainability, says Massie. The \$32.6 million, 71-unit housing project features a photovoltaic system that powers common areas and uses renewable materials throughout its buildings. The city supported the project both politically and financially.

The state of California and Orange County also provided funding for Granite Court, which serves families earning 30–60 percent of the area’s median income.

Another example of how sustainability can sell a project is the acclaimed green development Solara, which was built by nonprofit Community HousingWorks in 2007. Located in the town of Poway in San Diego County, the project harvests the California sun for all residential and common areas.

“The city of Poway fully supported the green and sustainable aspects of the proposed project,” says Anne B. Wilson, director of housing and real estate

development for Community HousingWorks. "I believe this did help win overall interest and support."

The City Council backed the green features, and that support was felt by the department heads, so everyone adopted the attitude of "how do we make this new stuff work?" says Wilson.

In rural Pasco, Wash., Tepeyac Haven provides affordable housing for farm workers. The development received a gold certification under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating program. Its green characteristics helped win the support of the city's technical staff, who were excited by its different features, says Paul Purcell, president of Beacon Development Group, which worked on the project.

However, the greater benefit may be in the long run. Purcell believes the status of Tepeyac Haven helped open the door for the group's second development in town. In its new comprehensive plan, Pasco emphasizes sustainable design and project location based on existing services. "We were able to highlight Pasco II's ability to further these city goals by using Tepeyac as an example," he says. All the attention that the project received for its energy-saving features also ensured that it was well-known by city leaders.

Wilson has experienced a similar reaction. Her team has found urban communities extremely interested in sustainable designs, and Community HousingWorks' history with Solara helps win support for other developments.

Not Everyone Is Impressed by Sustainability

Some experts say sustainability by itself is unlikely to sway hard-core opponents.

“Sustainability is good but an overplayed word that has little political weight at city hall,” says Patrick Slevin, a nationally recognized expert on NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) opposition. “Everyone’s talking about it, but developers must be more diligent in educating community stakeholders on how sustainability improves their quality of life and why they should advocate for it. If not, vocal special interests will likely emerge and distort the sustainable merits of the project.”

A former mayor of Safety Harbor, Fla., Slevin is principal of the Slevin Group, a firm that helps corporations win community and political support for their real estate interests.

“It is critical for developers to identify, meet, and recruit local opinion leaders before an application becomes public,” he says. “Unfortunately, many developers expect to educate the community at a town hall meeting, which often ends up as a media spectacle benefiting opposing parties. Instead, conduct one-on-one meetings with allies to discuss the project and speak with local groups like the Rotary and Kiwanis.”

While many developers talk about environmental sustainability or economic sustainability, Slevin says it’s all about securing political sustainability.

“At the end of the day, developers are going to have to provide political cover for the elected officials,” he says. “Applicants must do more to sell a sustainable project and make it as politically viable for public officials as possible. If not, then the greenest

and most sustainable projects will be rejected.”

Like Slevin, Alan Mallach, a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of *A Decent Home: Planning, Building, and Preserving Affordable Housing*, is far from convinced that sustainability will be a big factor in overcoming NIMBY. Some people who are lukewarm to the idea of affordable housing may feel more positive about a development if it’s a good example of green building, but many concerns, such as a drop in property values, have little to do with sustainability, he says.

“The more positives that you can provide, the better,” he says. “At the same time, I don’t think you can avoid their issues. Showing, for example, that the development will not reduce their property values.”

Another idea is to focus on the people who might live in the development—police officers, school teachers, home health aides—all important community members.

Make New Friends

A well-designed development may not change the minds of hard-core opponents, but it could bring some new friends to the cause. Usually, environmentalists and developers get along as well as cats and dogs. The Sierra Club has turned the tables, however, giving a pat on the back to developments that offer

transportation choices and revitalize neighborhoods, including the Fruitvale Transit Village in Oakland, Calif.



The Sierra Club supported the development of Fruitvale Village in Oakland, Calif.

Led by the nonprofit Unity Council, the community demanded the mixed-income project instead of the parking garage that was initially proposed. Steps from a Bay Area Rapid Transit train station, it's the epitome of transit-oriented development. The project replaces a parking lot with affordable housing, retail, and offices.

In the neighboring city of Berkeley, the Sierra Club filed an amicus brief on behalf of an affordable housing development that was being challenged. The Sierra Club had been campaigning against sprawl and recognized the benefits of Sacramento Senior Homes, a multifamily, infill development close to transportation. Affordable Housing Associates eventually overcame its legal challenges to build the project.

Don't Rely on the Sustainability Aspect

The Rural Ulster Preservation Co. (RUPCO) has been trying to develop an affordable housing development in Woodstock, N.Y., in the face of strong opposition from vocal neighbors.

Plans for the 53-unit development call for it to be built using the latest environmentally friendly materials and building techniques, including geothermal heating. It would be one of the most innovative affordable housing projects in the region.

“For some, the green aspects have been compelling reasons to lend support,” RUPCO Executive Director Kevin O'Connor says. “For others, particularly opponents, the green aspects were not enough to carry the day.”

When skepticism about the sustainable features was raised, RUPCO convened a public meeting of engineers and consultants that focused public attention on the proposed building envelope, lighting, mechanical systems, and energy incentives

that was reported in the local media.

RUPCO has trumpeted Woodstock Commons' green features in newspaper ads and mailers sent to town residents. The group has even jumped on the current social media wave and launched a Facebook page that features information about the organization and Woodstock Commons.

It has been a tough haul, but O'Connor remains hopeful.

"Last year, as the cost of energy, especially fuel oil, skyrocketed, there was increased interest in our proposed geothermal systems and alternative strategies to eliminate the use of fossil fuels," says O'Connor. "Today, it seems there is increased popular recognition of the importance and value of sustainable design."

PSC President Andre Shashaty believes that developers that follow strategies like RUPCO's will have the best shot at securing approval and financing. "Sustainability features will not neutralize opposition, but they do help garner support, and playing the sustainability card can help developers win the community relations game."