

UNDERSTANDING NIMBY: PUBLIC OPINION LESSONS FOR LOCALLY UNWANTED LAND USE PROJECTS

How to build projects people don't like...

One of the key challenges facing companies, governments and regulators is siting locally unwanted facilities. It seems that every day there are new media reports about oil spills, leaking pipelines, exploding natural gas generating stations and growing community opposition to wind farms. While siting a locally unwanted land use (LULU) project has never been easy, it's getting harder to navigate the increasingly volatile public affairs environment with each and every one of these stories.

At Innovative Research Group (INNOVATIVE), we have drawn from our experience in dealing with a wide variety of NIMBY challenges to give our clients a practical framework to understand how to communicate when siting LULUs. In our experience, successful siting efforts seek to secure public permission, not public support. People may not like that a gas-fired generating plant or community housing project is being built near them, but our research shows that if you can answer five key questions, public opinion can accept it as necessary.

Not in your backyard? So what?

Often, governments and companies constructing LULUs make the mistake of thinking it is good enough to have a two-step process before breaking ground: select the site and acquire the permits. After all, if you have a license to build something somewhere, who cares what people think?

Proponents should care because LULUs, like all other building projects, ultimately require social permission to operate. People are quick to actively oppose a project that impacts them directly, and the broader public can easily identify with those who are impacted. Ignore the public and your organization can quickly see itself in a David vs. Goliath situation that results in construction delays, loss of corporate reputation, and unwanted government intervention.

Navigating Public Opinion

In our experience, public opinion moves in consistent and predictable ways. INNOVATIVE's "Dynamic Model of Public Opinion" shows that public opinion is anchored by predispositions like personal values, feelings about social groups and political identity. It is moved by public debate and underlying social change and becomes easier or more difficult to move depending on an individual's degree of engagement and political sophistication.

INNOVATIVE has applied this framework to understand the specific dynamics driving public opinion on major infrastructure projects. Identifying the anchors that hold public opinion in place – specifically the favourable and unfavourable anchors that relate to the LULU – helps us to understand target audiences and shape communications strategies. If you're going to harness the winds of public debate, it's helpful to know in which direction you should turn your sails to achieve the most favourable outcome.

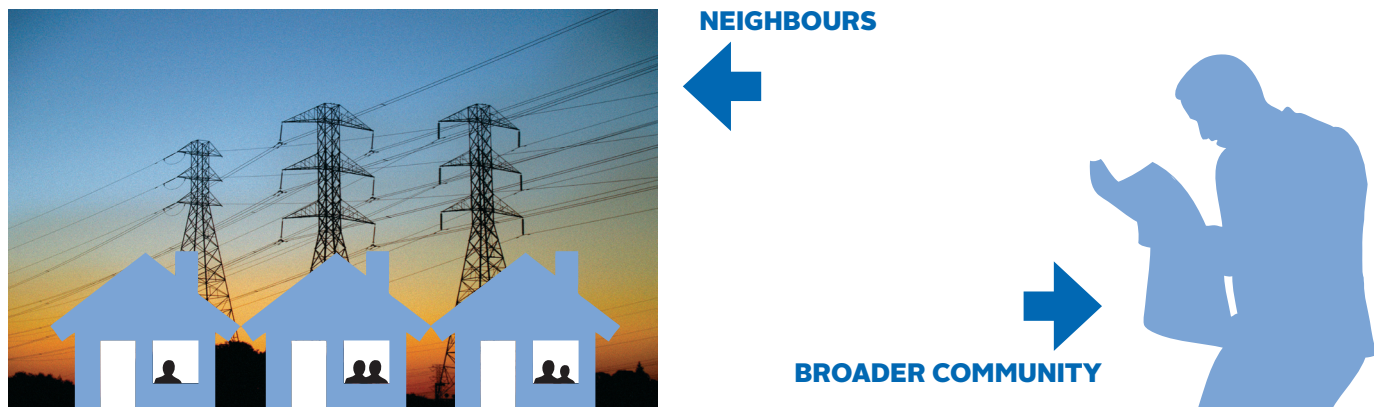
How does this apply to your challenge? Our NIMBY Model at work.

Segment your audience

Knowing your audience is necessary when constructing any public consultation process or community relations campaign. NIMBYs generally impact two groups of people: neighbours of the project and members of the broader community.

The people who will be most impacted by a LULU are **neighbours** who live near the proposed project site. Very few people will buy a house expecting that a transmission line will someday run through their backyard. Neighbours are paying a private price for a public good. They will quickly and vocally oppose a project, and the general public can easily sympathise with their plight. For that reason, this group is a mitigations target, not a communications one.





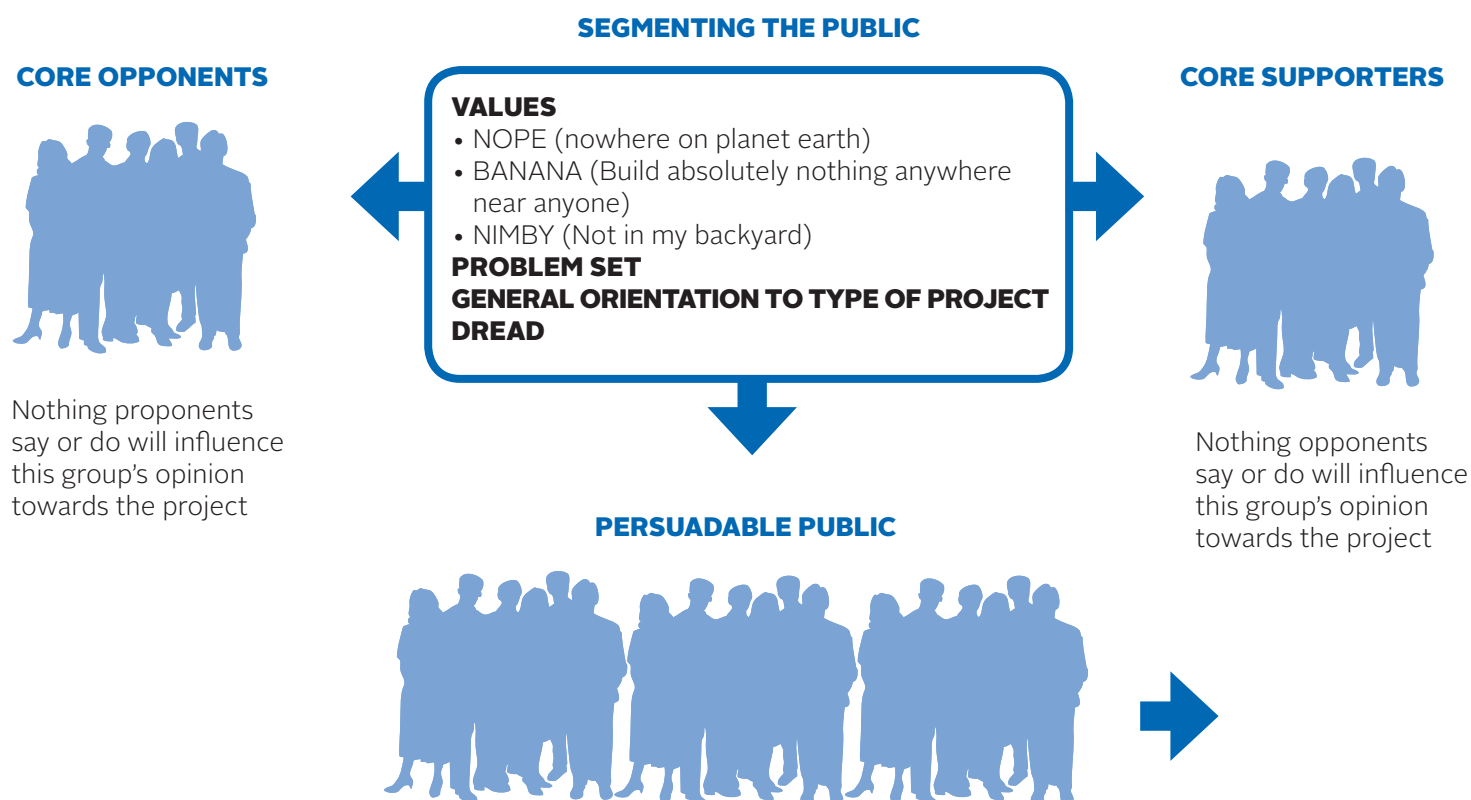
For members of the **broader community**, a LULU project is fundamentally a communications issue. Some members of the general public might be core opponents to the project, but their opposition is primarily based on their personal value anchors. Some members of the general public might be core supporters of the project, but these people are few and far between. Most members of the general public are persuadable.

Opinion research will allow you to segment the general public into one of the following three categories:

- **Core opponents** who will never support this project, no matter what anyone says or does;
- **Core supporters** who will always support this project, regardless of the evidence against it; and,
- **Members of the persuadable public.**

This sub-group of the persuadable public will become the primary target of any communications and public relations strategy. Knowing more about the persuadable public is fundamental to the construction of any kind of communications plan. Opinion research can help you determine:

- Individuals' broader value orientations;
- The public's perceptions of current problems facing the community;
- General attitude towards the LULU; and,
- Dread (examples include fear about the LULU causing health problems, increased crime, etc.).



PERSUADING THE PUBLIC

We have determined that there are five hurdles that need to be cleared before members of the persuadable public will lend their support to a LULU project. These are:

- Does this project really need to be built?
- Why can't you build it somewhere else?
- Have you done all you can to minimize the number of people directly impacted?
- Have you done all you can to minimize the impact on the people who must be affected (i.e. mitigation, compensation, etc.)?
- Have the people who will be directly affected been treated fairly during this process?

If you can answer yes to each of these questions, you can build permission. If you answer no to any one of these, your project is at serious risk of being derailed.

PUBLIC OPINION HURDLES



NEED?



**BEST
OPTION?**



**FEWEST
PEOPLE?**



**SMALLEST
IMPACT?**



**FAIR
PROCESS?**



OPPONENTS



SUPPORTERS

CHANGING PUBLIC OPINION

Change in public opinion is not only possible, it's inevitable. At INNOVATIVE, we use research to understand the components that influence public opinion so our clients can do something about it. We're a leader in understanding NIMBY attitudes and have provided research-based strategic advice to some of the country's largest power producers, distributors and utilities, oil and gas companies, as well as associations, governments and various regulatory agencies. INNOVATIVE will work with you to create a strategy that addresses the unique public opinion challenges facing your organization.

CONTACT US TO GET STARTED

Innovative Research Group provides research-based strategic advice in the fields of public affairs, corporate communications and fundraising.

Toronto

56 The Esplanade, Suite 310
Toronto, ON | M5E 1A6
(t) 416.642.6340
(f) 416.640.5988

Vancouver

1055 West Hastings, 3rd Floor
Vancouver, BC | V6E 2E9
(t) 604.662.4022
(f) 604.684.6024



info@innovativeresearch.ca | www.innovativeresearch.ca

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