

Nimbys not overriding force

David Pett, **Financial Post** · Nov. 21, 2011 | Last Updated: Nov. 21, 2011 2:08 AM ET

NIMBY advocates have been a powerful force in delaying U.S. government approval of Trans Canada Corp.'s proposed Keystone XL pipeline. Similarly, not-in-my-backyard campaigners in Ontario helped force the provincial government to cancel natural gas power plants in Mississauga and Oakville in the past 13 months.

But most North American infrastructure projects continue to get support from local residents, who believe new development is mostly good for their communities, says a survey from Innovative Research Group, a Canadian public opinion research and strategy firm.

"Right now, a lot of land-use developers may be thinking there is a big wave of NIMBY out there," said Greg Lyle, its managing director.

"The reality is that NIMBY is not particularly worse this year than it has been in the past," said Vancouver-based Mr. Lyle. "In fact, most real projects are at least accepted and often welcomed by the local communities."

The survey, two separate online polls in Canada and the United States, asked respondents about their views on 15 types of infrastructure projects including landfills, highways, bridges, power plants and pipelines.

Participants were not asked about specific projects, but more generally about what they thought of these projects - whether they were directly affected or whether one of these projects was being planned for their own community.

Of Canadians surveyed, 42% said they saw the project being built near them as a good thing for their community and they support it, while 25% said they did not like the project, but thought it was necessary.

U.S. support was slightly stronger, with 51% of those surveyed seeing their local project as good for their community, and 26% viewing it as necessary, despite disliking it.

The survey said NIMBY projects are most widely accepted in the Canadian Prairies and western United States, with four in five respondents viewing their infrastructure development as either a positive or necessary development for their community.

Atlantic Canadians and residents of the northeastern United States are most likely to oppose their local project, with 22% and 15% of respondents, respectively, opposed to their local projects.

On both sides of the border, electricity projects were not seen as better or worse than other infrastructure projects. Nuclear plants received harsh scores in general but when survey participants were asked about nuclear projects being proposed in their own communities, the responses were more favourable.

Mr. Lyle said many nuclear projects now being proposed are near existing projects, thus residents have no fear of the unknown and know what they are getting. By comparison, he said respondents viewed natural gas shale projects more consistently harshly.

"Nuclear looks tough, but it is also seen as a good safe generator of jobs," he said. "As for shale gas, people are nervous about it in general and are equally nervous when one has been proposed near them."

Mr. Lyle said the overall results of the survey suggest Keystone and other projects that have experienced recent NIMBY opposition are isolated events. Keystone is mostly a political issue related to the upcoming U.S. elections in 2012, he said, and while the cancellation of a new natural-gas fired power plant in Oakville, Ont. in 2010 was a genuine and legitimate case of NIMBY related to an air-quality report, the scrapping of a similar power plant in nearby Mississauga was also "overwhelmingly a political story."

The Canadian portion of the survey, with a total sample of 2,762 respondents, was completed between Sept. 22 and Oct. 15, and has estimated margin of error of plus or minus 1.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. In the United States 1,009 respondents were surveyed between Sept. 26 and 29 with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times of 20.

dpett@nationalpost.com

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