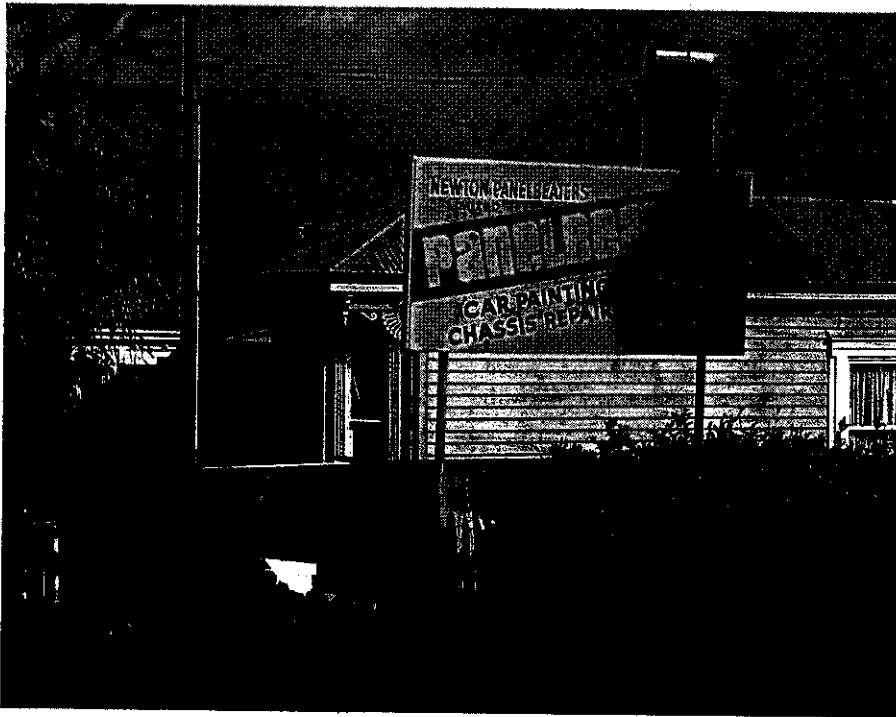


LABELS AVOID THE ISSUES

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Neighbours who object to proposals are branded "nimby" bigots to dismiss their often valid concerns.



"Few people would want a panel-beater next door."

In the world of resource use planning, the term "nimbys" (the "not in my backyard" syndrome) is synonymous with bigotry, prejudice, selfishness, sensationalism, obstruction and extra costs.

The general attitude of planners and councillors is that people with the nimby approach are dangerous and should not be encouraged. The best thing a planner can do is to ensure that the extra costs they can create for the council and the proponent are contained.

The most effective way of doing this, if you can get away with it, is to approach the land-use provisions of the district scheme or "plan" as it will now be called, with the maximum degree of creativity, flexibility and imagination.

Once the development is underway, neighbours who object can expect little sympathy. Their opposition can be neutralised by labelling them "troublemakers" or by accusing them of not checking out the district plan provisions before purchasing their property. You can also tell them they are

being selfish and even unchristian.

Sometimes however, even with the widest stretch of imagination, it is not possible to fit a proposal into the existing provisions of a district plan and then, horror of horrors, we are forced to lock horns with the neighbour who can (inevitably it seems) enlist the support of other neighbours, "friends in high places", experts with impressive CVs, and worst of all, the editor of the local paper. Does that sound familiar? It is a planner's and developer's nightmare. It is a situation which more often than not we as planners create — because of a lack of belief in the willingness of people to cooperate, lack of training in consultation skills, and even at times professional arrogance.

It is much easier to label the opposition in a way that will obviate the need to really

analyse the situation, acknowledge and attempt to address their concerns. Hence the term "nimbys". It is rather like the man who labels his partner "frigid" to avoid having to consider the adequacy of his own sexual performance.

The time has come when we should stop labelling and start to address the root causes of the problem. And as I see it, the root cause of much of the nimby syndrome is poor process.

Most people are quite capable of understanding the needs of a complex society, of recognising an appropriate solution to an unmet need and of coming to terms with the establishment of a less than desirable facility in the vicinity of their homes when that is the only or best solution.

In many of the land use proposals with which I have been involved, including a housing complex for people with psychiatric disabilities and a home for street kids, the objections from neighbours were not motivated by the unsavoury qualities we associate with the nimby syndrome. To a large extent the primary factor was ignorance, but the basic concerns arising from that were plain anxiety about the effect such a facility would have on their quality of life and property values. To my mind these are perfectly valid concerns and need to be addressed.

In my experience, the root causes of the so-called nimby syndrome include:

- lack of information;
- feelings of powerlessness arising from inadequate consultation;
- lack of confidence in the ability or integrity of decisionmakers or the proponents;
- lack of trust in the systems proposed for managing and monitoring the operations.

This suggests that the way to deal with nimbys is not to ignore or ridicule those who practise it but to address the adequacy of our planning, consultation, implementation, monitoring and mitigation practices.

The essential ingredients to the success of community consultation are **time and professional and political commitment**. If you are not prepared to stay with the process until you reach the best possible solution then don't start. Otherwise you will only further damage the credibility of public consultation and make it more difficult to get the community's trust and co-operation next

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time around. If there is insufficient support for trying to work through local concerns, make that explicit and brace yourselves for the financial and political costs.

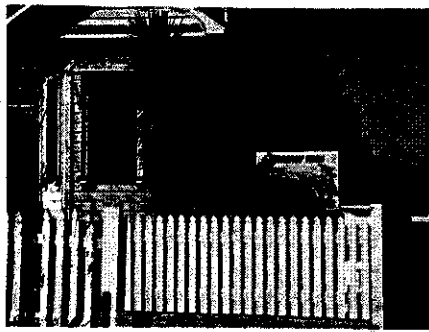
1. Involve the local objectors in clarifying the need and identifying an appropriate solution including the best site. For this you will need to have researched such things as: the demand or extent of the need; the necessary ingredients for an appropriate location for the proposal; the various options which have been considered.

The neighbours will come up with alternatives which you should be prepared to investigate but if you are right, and the suggested site is the most appropriate one, by a process of elimination, most will eventually accept that.

2. Arrange a meeting between the proponents and the neighbours to talk through the neighbours' concerns and the measures which can be taken to reduce or eliminate those concerns. It is essential that these meetings be well facilitated to avoid their disintegrating into verbal warfare.

3. If there is to be a committee structure to manage the facility, include representatives of the neighbours on the committee. In the two cases I am aware of where this has been done, it has been most effective.

4. When negative impacts are unavoidable, acknowledge that and together with those who will be adversely affected, identify the measures which can be taken to reduce the impacts. Be prepared to front up with the resources needed for mitigation. This after all is what the "assessment of effects" is all about – making the true costs of proposals explicit.



Anxiety about the effect of neighbouring facilities on quality of life is a valid concern.

5. Use the concerns of local people as a basis for performance indicators on which to monitor operations and get their approval to the monitoring system proposed. Key factors which are essential to effective monitoring are:

- someone must be given responsibility for taking action when things go wrong;
- there must be a clear, well-advertised process for people to use if they have complaints;
- complaints must be, and seen to be, acted on promptly;
- the council must make it clear to all parties that it is prepared to close the facility down if the conditions of consent are not met. (This will ensure that the operators take the conditions seriously.)

Few people would want a panel-beater next door, or a refuse tip for that matter, and no amount of consultation will change their minds. Inevitably such proposals will stir up a lot of local opposition, much of

which could be classified as yet another case of the nimby syndrome.

However, there is another way of looking at it. Maybe proposals for such uses in residential areas are contrary to common sense. (Now there's a revolutionary thought!) Maybe the objectors are right and you need to decline the application or find an alternative site!

However, there are other developments which because of our lifestyles and settlement structures must inevitably be located in residential areas even though they can be clearly seen as detrimental to the life quality of nearby residents. I am thinking particularly of major roading networks. There is no getting away from the fact that roads with heavy traffic volumes have major negative impacts on adjacent residential areas. For those living beside the "dotted line", there will always be a more appropriate solution, at least initially.

But in my experience a consultation process which involves local residents in the analysis of the problem (particularly their part as motorists in adding to that problem), in identifying possible solutions (including alternative routes), and which encourages them to help formulate mitigation measures, can do much to overcome their opposition.

In summary, I think that the Resource Management Act provides great opportunities to reduce opposition to developments and to generate a greater degree of faith among our communities in the planning system. The key to its successful implementation will be good process backed up with professional and political commitment and appropriate skills. ■

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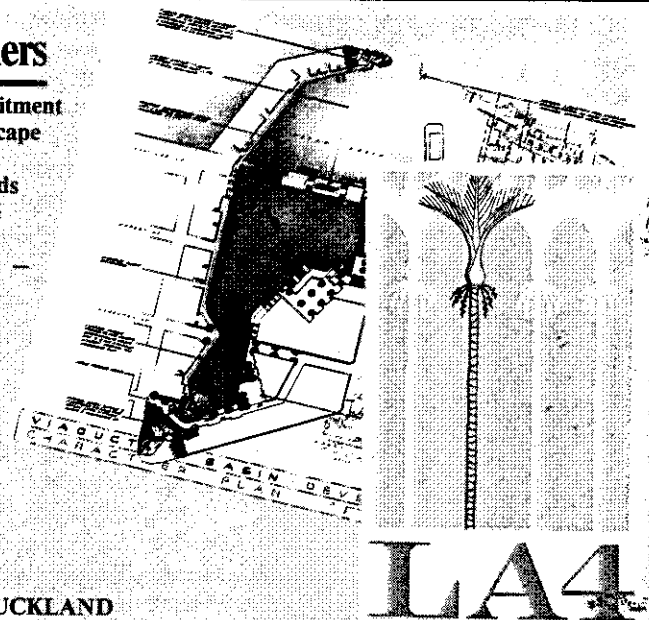
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