

Overcoming Opposition and Building Community Acceptance: Everything is Political

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Sixty-two percent of Americans say they'd oppose an aggregate quarry if one were proposed in their hometown. To put that in perspective, it's more opposition than a nuclear power plant registered in the 2009 Saint Index survey of attitudes about local real estate development projects.

Despite the economic recession, America's NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) attitude is still overwhelming in every region, the nationwide survey of 1,000 adults found. An aggregate quarry is near the top of the "unwanted" list, trailing only a landfill (78 percent opposition) or a casino (77 percent) when it comes to a person's hometown.

In such an environment, it is increasingly necessary for operators seeking to develop or expand a quarry to demonstrate public support before local politicians will vote for a needed zoning change, an air permit application or any other public approvals.

No matter how good a project is or how many tax dollars it will bring into a

community, elected officials increasingly take the expedient path of siding with the roomful of angry constituents – especially if the only voices in favor are the applicant and his paid consultants.

Without visible public support to justify or provide "cover" for voting in favor of a controversial project, politicians have no desire or will to defy the voters who can vote them out of office.

Opposition groups, meanwhile, are becoming sophisticated in their methods and abilities to network with like-minded NIMBY activists around the globe. They exchange ideas and can send a negative news story about an operator or quarry across the country.

Public approvals and zoning changes are political decisions. While the science and technical studies supporting an application are knowable parts in the processes, the politics are often volatile and



unpredictable. Nearly all politicians possess a strong desire to be re-elected, and to be re-elected they must be liked. Therefore, they need to be on the "correct" side of controversial decisions in the judgement of a majority of voters.

The problem we face on a daily basis is that fear sells, and the unknown is scary to most folks. Lack of knowledge makes it easy for untruths about a quarry operation to quickly take root in a community when spread by opponents. Telling people that their way of life is about to change for the worse is a sure way to rile homeowners. A quarry developer ignores this dynamic at his or her peril.

Residents ultimately oppose quarry development because they do not understand it or the science that goes into the industry. Most members of the general public have in mind a picture of somebody standing over an old-fashioned plunger, setting off an uncontrolled blast that sends boulders flying. And almost nobody has even the vaguest understanding of

the wide variety of uses aggregates have in their everyday lives.

Most opposition to a quarry comes from nearby residents. At times they are bolstered by regional and national environmental organizations, a situation that depends a great deal on the size of the development and who the developer is. Local residents oppose projects for the most primal of reasons; in their opinions, they are protecting their primary asset, the value of their home and their quality of life.

All Politics is Local, All Land Use is Political

Companies spend a great deal of resources prior to filing an application and announcing their project publicly. Environmental studies are completed, drilling is done, samples are examined. But most companies do not make the effort to gain an in-depth understanding of what can be the highest hurdle to overcome — the local politics.

Before filing any application, conducting political due diligence is a logical step. You need to know

where you stand with the local politicians (not what they tell you to your face, but what they say to their constituents). The due diligence process should also involve identifying where potential opposition is likely to surface and the possible concerns of your closest neighbors.

Other basic information to gather includes issues such as: Where does the mayor live (near your site)? Do members of the the city council routinely defer to the wishes of the councilor in whose district the project is located? What are the relationships on the board? If Councilor A is going to vote yes, do others always vote with him? Being fully aware of these dynamics is essential in tallying your vote count prior to the public hearings, identifying which councilors need attention and knowing where to focus resident outreach.

There Are Few Secrets in the Internet Age

The Internet provides any opponents and community



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groups access to stories going back years, and the archives know no geographical bounds. If you are a nationwide quarry company, a problem you had four years ago in Macon, Ga., is now fodder for opponents of a quarry you are trying to permit in Tacoma, Wash. The Internet allows opponents to easily identify and interact with other community groups around the country or even the world. Groups bond together, exchange strategies, information and stories. Everything that was regional in the past is now international. So, conduct what politicians call "opposition research" on yourself. Find out what news stories or other information is available about you and your company on the internet before you start.

The Internet also is used to indict the industry as a whole. Tales about poor operators who care little for neighbors or maintaining good community and environmental standards become fodder for opposition groups. These stories may have absolutely nothing to do with the way you conduct your business, but


be ready to answer for them during the permitting process.

Conducting Community Outreach

Community outreach should be conducted before you go public, but time it with notifying the elected officials. Meet with the neighbors one to one before your opposition does. It is easier to form an opinion than to change an opinion. It is important that you avoid large group settings if at all possible. Holding one large community meeting in an effort to get your outreach over and done is a recipe for disaster. The larger the group, the more difficult it becomes to control. A small group of agitators can dominate a public meeting and turn the rest of the crowd against you — and the next day's news story will be all about the "intense citizen opposition" to your quarry or mine.

When facing a difficult land use battle and strong opposition, remember that voters matter. Local elected officials, regardless of the size of the

community, treasure their positions and want nothing more than to get re-elected. They may like your project and recognize the economic benefits that it will bring, but when faced with outraged constituents, they will walk away from you (regardless of what they have told you and your relationship with them beforehand). There are exceptions, of course, but don't risk your project by assuming your application is that special exception.

Outreach to citizens is best conducted as early in the process as possible. You really do not want your closest neighbors reading about your quarry for the first time in the newspaper. Much good will can be garnered by sitting down at the kitchen table, telling them your plans, getting their input and then maintaining communication. These neighbors may never support you, but they will appreciate your outreach, as will the board members. One of the worst things that can be said by a neighbor at a public hearing is "they never even met with me." 

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An important part of outreach is documenting everything you do. It not only allows you to rebut untrue claims that may be made later during the hearing process, but is the beginning of a valuable data base of supporters, potential supporters and opponents. Remember that a silent supporter is no help to your cause. When residents say they support what you are doing, ask them to sign a letter or petition stating that support.



Remain in touch and build relationships with your supporters and potential supporters, and you may be able to call upon them to speak at a public hearing. If not, you'll still have a written expression of their support to offer public officials.

Once you meet with your neighbors, it is time to begin organizing those residents who do not live in close proximity, but who may see the benefits of the quarry either through jobs, tax revenues or the multiplier effect you will have on local businesses. These residents are likely to sign a petition, write a letter or attend a public hearing if approached. Other outreach should be done with local organizations, youth sports and recreation groups that need park improvements, local businesses, the local Chamber of Commerce and friends and relatives of your employees. These are all potential supporters if approached.

Identify and approach "grasstops" community leaders, often long-term residents who are civically active and are influential with local officials.

Taking Action

A quiet supporter is no help to your cause. To be an effective supporter a citizen must be convinced to take some sort of action. That action could be as simple as signing a petition, being filmed for a video petition, writing a letter of support or speaking for you at a public hearing. Supporters who are most effective are those who will attend a public hearing on your behalf. Make sure

you give them talking points and that they know when to get up to speak. Having voter after voter get up and say the exact same thing diminishes the value. It is also important to stagger your speakers so they are not followed by a parade of uninterrupted opponents. If you stagger your speakers, you can break up any flow and momentum the opposition may gather if left uninterrupted.

You need to carefully prepare for a public hearing. One idea we've had success with is holding a barbeque for supporters prior to the hearing at a location near the hearing room. It provides an informal setting to prepare them, and they can all march together to the hearing. Have your supporters wear a bright lapel sticker, even those who will not speak, so board members know they support your project. Remember to make sure your supporters remain respectful, no matter how outrageous your opponents act.

What Do You Do Now?

You have just been successful and won all your necessary permits. It was a long, contentious, sometimes bruising process, but you are about to open for business and start sending stone to market. What do you do with those neighbors who opposed your application?

You can gloat, not give them the time or day and remind them constantly that you won and they lost. While that is probably the most tempting response, it is also the wrong one. You need to remember that this is a business and not personal.

You may not realize it, but you are going to have to go back to the town or county again sometime in the future. You may want to expand your reserves, you may want a special permit or a variance of some sort in the future. You have a business in the community, and it is always better to have a good relationship and be a good corporate neighbor.

This should be looked upon as an opportunity. Who is a better advocate in the future than your most ardent oppo-

nent who becomes a supporter? A past opponent or a neighbor who will stand up at a future hearing in town or a neighboring county and testify that you did everything you said you'd do is worth as much as any attorney, lobbyist or expert you hire. Embracing your opponents is good business. You may not ever get some of them on board, but you will be commended for making the effort.

Ignoring your opposition will result in a large headache as you run your operations. Those opponents will file complaints with the city or county and constantly be critical of your operations, and their statements can be used against you in neighboring communities. By maintaining communications, you are able to keep your fingers on the pulse of the community, you can disarm unfounded rumors early in the process, and you will create a lot of good will.

Communication is Key

One of the most important parts of any community plan is good communication. It is suggested that you have a company contact person for the community. This should be a consistent person who can field complaints, respond to them, provide answers and be responsive. The worst that can be done is to ignore questions and complaints because after they call you and do not get a response, their next call will be to the mayor or their councilor. You do not want to hear about their complaints from the mayor, especially if they tried you and got no response.

You will find that some people will always be unreasonable or that you cannot give them the answer they want, but always respond within 24 to 48 hours and acknowledge their perception of the problem, because that is how they see it. This could be simply an annoyance for you, but it is extremely important to them, so treat it as such. It will also assist with the mayor and the councilors if you have already responded to the complaint.



Adopt a grade at the local schools and have an annual quarry tour. Arrange for a geologist to speak to a science class. Events such as this can become an annual field trip and educational class. It can also be an excellent opportunity to speak to parents and teachers in a relaxed atmosphere about the role that aggregates play in their everyday lives.

Most companies will sponsor a local sports team. But wouldn't it be more effective to have you or your employees coach a little league team or a softball team? This gives your employee another chance to interact with parents as well, discussing the aggregate industry and everything that we do, safety and environmental concerns.

One current trend is for corporations to have a volunteer day, where they allow employees a day to volunteer in the community. >

Here are several simple steps you can take to reduce the number of complaints and keep goodwill within the community and with the local politicians:

- Be as consistent as possible with your blasting schedule.
- Develop a blasting notification system with anyone who requests it.
- Do absolutely everything you promised during the permitting process.

- Mitigate your dust as much as possible.
- Have your drivers obey all local traffic guidelines.

Community Involvement

Get involved in the community. Becoming more than just another business that donates to local causes can go a long way to enhance your image as a good corporate citizen.

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Take it a step further and have your employees volunteer on a project that you sponsor. Build a sand play area in the local park, reclaim an old field with the materials from the quarry. After you do this, you can name it after a prominent resident and have a dedication ceremony hosted by you and covered by the local media.

We have clients who hold an annual open house at the quarry, sponsor a community cookout and tour of the pit or use their pits for the 4th of July fireworks display.

The Database

In order to get the most benefit from these activities, you need to maintain a database. Maintain a sign-in sheet for all tours and put the names into the database. Send thank-you notes, Christmas cards and other correspondence. This will create a potential supporter list for any future instance where you need to call upon community backers. It is also very difficult for a resident to oppose you if they

have come to one of your events or you coached their child.

There is nothing that makes me want to scream more than when a client says, "We do all that, but we don't like to make a big deal out of it."

WRONG! Make a big deal out of it. There is nothing wrong with getting recognition for doing good work. Making it public lets those in the community see you as a genuine part of the community and not just a business operating in town. Becoming a recognized member of the community promotes good will with the local government and local community organizations. This will also be a benefit with the local elected officials. The mayor and other local politicians love to get their names and pictures in the newspaper accepting one of those six-foot checks or at a ribbon cutting ceremony for a new or revamped ball field. It is extremely difficult for an official to oppose you when you were in the local newspaper together last month.

It also will benefit you to publicize the industry awards you may receive. The NSSGA annual awards for community outreach, environmental and safety awards should be highlighted. You worked for them and you earned them. It will assist you in the future if you have a recorded history of industry recognition for the way you operate your quarry.

You have choices during and after your permitting process. You can either work with the community and keep the lines of communication open or not. The benefits from conducting outreach and staying involved with the community are real. ■

Christopher Hopkins is senior vice president for Aggregates and Mining with The Saint Consulting Group, a political land use consultancy that specializes in winning zoning and permitting battles for controversial development projects in the U.S., Canada and United Kingdom. Hopkins is scheduled to present this topic at the 2010 AGGI Academy.

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