

Opposition fades to big US land projects

CONSTRUCTION

Local support rises due to slowdown

But index still finds levels of 'nimbyism'

By Jonathan Birchall
in New York

The economic slowdown in the US has increased potential local support for new superstores, hospitals and even power plants, according to an annual survey of public attitudes towards big local land projects.

Sixty-eight per cent of 1,000 adults surveyed in June by Saint Consulting, which specialises in land use approval politics, said they were more likely to support projects in their home towns because of the economy – up from 59 per cent last year.

The fifth annual Saint Index found levels of potential support increased both for more popular local projects such as grocery stores and hospitals and the most unpopular, such as quarries, landfill sites and casinos.

Patrick Fox, president of Saint, said that “over the past two years we are seeing Americans more ready to accept development for economic reasons. We are looking at a good time for developers to start projects; they are going to have a better time enlisting support than they did before”.

In a sign of the impact of the economy on planning

decisions, Chicago's city council last month ended several years of opposition to attempts by Walmart, the mass discounter, to open stores in its city.

The decision was largely influenced by support from building unions and local community leaders who argued that proposed new stores would create more local jobs.

Saint advises its clients both on how to win political support for new local projects in “site fights” before planning committees, and how to organise political opposition to similar applications by rivals.

Its latest survey again demonstrated Walmart's success in reducing public opposition provoked by new stores, with 54 per cent of respondents saying they would oppose a new local store, down from 78 per cent in 2007, at the peak of an anti-Walmart campaign by the UFCW grocery workers' union.

But the 2010 survey found that a large Walmart is still likely to face more resistance than some of its main retail rivals, such as Target and Kmart, the discount stores, or Home Depot and Lowe's, the home improvement retailers.

In spite of the general declines in opposition levels, the index again found strong levels of nimbyism – or “not in my backyard” opposition to new developments – with 74 per cent saying they were opposed to any new projects in their community, unchanged from last year.