

# Avoiding and Overcoming Neighborhood Opposition to Affordable Rental Housing

---

By Jaimie Ross, President and CEO,  
Florida Housing Coalition

**N**ot in My Backyard (NIMBY) connotes objections made to stop the development of affordable housing based on fear and prejudice. NIMBY-ism presents a particularly pernicious obstacle to meeting local housing needs. The outcry from constituents expressing concerns over the siting and permitting of affordable housing can lead to lengthy and hostile public proceedings, frustrated Consolidated Plan implementation, increased development costs, and property rights disputes. The consequence is less development and preservation of housing at a time when the country is in desperate need of more rental housing. The resulting unmet need for rental units leads to an increase in homelessness. Overcoming opposition to affordable rental housing is key to producing and preserving desperately needed affordable homes.

## TOOLS FOR LOCAL SUCCESS

### Launch Education Campaigns

Increased understanding of affordable rental housing and the positive impact it has on individuals, families, and the community at large is instrumental to gaining wide support. The more informed the public, local government staff, and elected officials are about the need for affordable rental housing and the benefits of avoiding housing insecurity and homelessness, the more leverage advocates will have to advance the development of affordable rental homes.

Advocates should make use of credible research and local data to support their message. Anecdotal information about particular residents and the success of previous developments goes a long way in a public education effort. There are many resources available to help in an education campaign. The [ALICE](#) Report (Asset Limited, Low-Income, Constrained, Employed) by United Way, which busts the myths about

who needs rental housing, is based on research showing that fulltime low-income employed workers do not make enough money to pay for market rate apartments. Reports from credible entities that do not focus on affordable housing can be used in addition to the reports prepared by housing organizations, such as the *Out of Reach* Report and *Home Matters* Reports. Reports on housing prepared by non-housing advocacy organizations attract the attention of news outlets and provide allies for the cause.

Advocates should educate elected officials and the community at large to view affordable rental housing as a community asset or as infrastructure. Without an adequate supply of affordable rental housing, local businesses will suffer, and communities will lose essential workforce including teachers, first responders, and hospital personnel. If there is a lack of affordable rental housing, workers will be forced to live far away from their jobs and will spend more of their money on transportation and housing costs, leaving less money to invest in the local economy.

Affordable rental housing should be viewed as an essential infrastructure need for communities in the same vein as roads, bridges, parks, and sanitary water. When affordable housing is viewed as infrastructure, it may also help advocates to gain approval for inclusionary housing policies, whereby affordable rentals are produced concurrent with market rate housing. This has the double benefit of producing more affordable housing and overcoming NIMBY opposition, as the developer can respond to neighborhood opposition, if any, by explaining that the affordable housing component of the development is a local government requirement.

### Garner Support from a Broad Range of Interests

Advocates should ask members of the business community, clergy, social service agencies, and others who would be well received, to stand with

them in advancing affordable housing goals. State and local business chambers and economic development councils are increasingly adopting workforce housing as a legislative priority. These supporters can be helpful in making the connection between housing development and other community concerns. For instance, local chambers can speak to the need for workforce housing and members of the local school board or parent advisory committees can attest to the imperative need for stable rental housing to support children's success in school. Potential beneficiaries of the development, including future residents, may also be effective advocates.

The media can be a crucial ally; whenever advocates foresee a potential NIMBY problem, it is best to contact the media right away so that they understand the development plans, the public purpose, and the population to be served before they hear neighborhood opposition.

### **Educate Elected Officials**

Once a NIMBY battle ensues, it is often too late to educate. Advocates should anticipate the value of and the need to build relationships with elected officials and their staff members before a NIMBY issue arises. It is imperative to underscore the importance of affordable housing and the consequences of not having enough rental housing, such as homelessness, so that elected officials make the connection between adequate rental housing and the economic health of the entire community. Embracing affordable rental housing as a community asset and as an essential infrastructure need helps shape the vision of a successful affordable housing strategy and maximizes community potential. When residents come out in force to oppose lower-priced housing in their neighborhoods, it will help elected officials overcome any opposition knowing that workforce housing is a critical part of the community's infrastructure.

Advocates should include allies in the education process. Learning about elected officials' interests will help inform advocates of the best allies to bring to meetings. For example, one elected official may be more inclined to hear from local businesses about the need

for employee housing, while another may be moved by hearing from local clergy about the needs of homeless veterans, elders, and people with disabilities. Whenever possible, advocates should invite elected officials to visit completed developments and should share credit with them at ribbon cuttings and when speaking with the media. Whether advocates can meet with elected officials regarding a pending approval depends upon the *ex parte* rules in each jurisdiction. If advocates discover that community opposition is meeting with elected officials about a development, advocates should try to do the same.

### **Address All Legitimate Opposition**

The key to overcoming community opposition is addressing the opposition's legitimate concerns. Legitimate, non-discriminatory concerns around issues like traffic or project design may lead the affordable housing developer to adjust a proposed development. For example, modifying the location of an entrance driveway or modifying the design of the building to ensure that the affordable rental development fits within the aesthetics of the existing community may be changes worth making, even if they come with an increase in cost. It is always wise for the affordable housing developer to work with the neighbors and be able to report to the local elected body that they have done their best to address the concerns of the opposition.

Property values are often at the root of neighborhood opposition. Yet, virtually without exception, property value and affordable housing research finds no negative effect on neighboring market rate property values. In fact, in some instances, affordable housing has increased the value of neighboring property. In November 2016, Trulia released a report, *There Doesn't Go the Neighborhood: Low-Income Housing Has No Impact on Nearby Home Values*, adding fresh data to the large body of research showing that affordable housing does not decrease neighboring property values.

The critical point is this: once all legitimate concerns are addressed, if opposition persists, it can be stated with certainty that the opposition

is illegitimate and is therefore inappropriate, arbitrary, capricious, or unlawful for the local government to consider in making its land use decision. The unlawfulness of the opposition may be a violation of fair housing laws and in violation of the substantive due process rights afforded by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S Constitution, as explained below.

### **Know the Law and Expand Legal Protections**

The federal “Fair Housing Act” is not new. Advocates should view neighborhood opposition through the lens of fair housing and fundamental rights. If all legitimate concerns have been addressed, it is likely that thwarting the affordable rental development violates federal fair housing law and/or the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Under 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment jurisprudence, local officials must have some rational, police power-based (public health, safety, or welfare) purpose for exercising development decisions. Individuals have a fundamental right to fair and non-arbitrary land use decisions. Courts have held that the public’s negative attitude, or fear, unsubstantiated by factors that are properly cognizable in a development proceeding, are not permissible bases for land use decisions. If a local government denies an affordable rental housing development due to illegitimate political or otherwise irrational motives not based on rational evidence, its decision may be challenged under the “Civil Rights Act of 1871” (42 U.S.C. § 1983) for violating the affordable housing developer’s substantive due process rights. As advocates, we can help local elected officials avoid liability by providing education about the protections provided by fair housing law and the affirmative duty that government must safeguard fair housing.

Advocates can push for state or local discrimination laws that make it harder for NIMBY-ism to prevail. For example, in 2000, the “Florida Fair Housing Act” (the state’s substantial equivalent to the federal “Fair Housing Act”) was amended to include affordable housing as a protected class (Section 760.26, Florida Statutes). In 2009, North Carolina adopted a similar statute to add affordable housing as a

protected class in its fair housing law. Decision makers and their staffs must be aware of the law if it is to be helpful to the cause. The expansion of State Fair Housing Protections to include affordable housing in Florida has been successful because housing advocates have been conscientious about ensuring that local government lawyers know about the statutory change. It is now commonplace in Florida for a city or county attorney to inform the elected body during a heated public hearing that they will run afoul of the state’s fair housing law if they deny an affordable housing developer’s application.

### **Avoid Unnecessary Approvals**

The greater the number of land use and development approvals that require a vote by the elected body, the more opportunities there will be for neighborhood opposition. Two ways to avoid unnecessary approvals are (1) “by right” development and (2) approvals made at the staff level rather than at a public hearing. In Los Angeles, neighborhood opposition for siting supportive housing led advocates to push for a local code change to permit supportive housing on property zoned for public facilities, removing the requirement for a zoning change in certain circumstances, and thereby reducing the threat of neighborhood opposition.

To encourage “by right” affordable rental housing development, advocates should fight for zoning codes that contain predictable standards for development with quick administrative review, reducing the opportunity for community pushback. There must be a balance between public input at the outset while also giving affordable housing developers the predictability needed to carry out their projects without delay.

Restrictive zoning, particularly single-family zoning, creates a high hurdle for affordable housing. In December 2018, Minneapolis, Minnesota became the first major city in the United States to adopt a plan to allow up to three dwelling units on a single family lot in areas zoned for single-family only housing. This will allow duplex and triplex rental housing in what would otherwise be an exclusively single-family

homeownership area. Upzoning policies such as these remove the obligation for an affordable housing developer to seek land use changes on a case-by-case basis that typically invites NIMBY-ism. If clear and predictive development standards are implemented from the outset, there will be less NIMBY-ism on the back-end.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### Managing Local Opposition through Education and Communication

“Opposition to Affordable Housing in the USA: Debate Framing and the Responses of Local Actors”: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263225197\\_Opposition\\_to\\_Affordable\\_Housing\\_in\\_the\\_USA\\_Debate\\_Framing\\_and\\_the\\_Responses\\_of\\_Local\\_Actors](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263225197_Opposition_to_Affordable_Housing_in_the_USA_Debate_Framing_and_the_Responses_of_Local_Actors)

The Original NPH Toolkit: <http://nonprofithousing.org/resources/the-original-nph-toolkit>

California Department of Housing and Community Development: <http://www.hcd.ca.gov/community-development/community-acceptance/index.shtml>

“Myths and Facts About Affordable and High Density Housing”: <http://www.hcd.ca.gov/community-development/community-acceptance/index/docs/mythsnfacts.pdf>

### Property Value Studies

*There Doesn't Go the Neighborhood: Low-Income Housing Has No Impact on Nearby Home Values:* <https://www.trulia.com/blog/trends/low-income-housing/>

Documents and Websites on Affordable Housing and the Relationship to Property Values: [http://www.hcd.ca.gov/community-development/community-acceptance/index/docs/prop\\_value.pdf](http://www.hcd.ca.gov/community-development/community-acceptance/index/docs/prop_value.pdf)

Effects of Low-Income Housing on Property Values: <https://www.nar.realtor/effects-of-low-income-housing-on-property-values#>

### Additional Examples of State Laws

California law bars state-sponsored discrimination in residency, ownership, and land use decisions based on the method of financing and the intended occupancy of any residential development by persons who are very low-, low-, moderate-, or middle-income. CA: Cal Gov. Code S. 65008 (1984).

Washington law provides that “A city, county, or other local governmental entity or agency may not adopt, impose, or enforce requirements on an affordable housing development that are different than {sic} the requirements imposed on housing developments generally.” WA: RCW 36.130.020 (2008).