

STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY OPPOSITION TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING



This summary report **highlights the key findings** from Civida's applied research project on affordable housing and neighbourhoods.

The purpose of the research was to **develop an evidence-based approach** to providing responses to community opposition and contribute to further knowledge in the Alberta context.

The full report on strategies for responding to community opposition and factsheets about affordable housing are available on our website at civida.ca/AHFacts.

Despite the known benefits of affordable housing and the negative aspects of housing inequality, the supply of social and affordable housing in Canada is lacking. One challenge to increasing the supply of affordable housing is community opposition, often described as NIMBYism or Not in My Backyard opposition.

Community opposition to affordable housing and other public infrastructure is typically based on fears that are often rooted in stigma and stereotypes about race and low-income households.¹ They include concern for decreasing property values, increasing density and crime, and changing community character.²

Community opposition to affordable housing and other public infrastructure in a certain area is typically based on fear.

What impact does community opposition have on affordable housing?

Community opposition:

- Is a barrier to the supply of affordable housing. It increases costs, reduces site availability, impedes designs, increases the time individuals and families wait for affordable housing, and overall undermines the construction of equitable housing.³
- Prevents communities from benefitting from diversity and leads to the exclusion of certain groups, which limits their geographical and economic mobility and restricts their access to high-quality amenities and services.⁴
- Can also make it more difficult for tenants when they move in to feel welcome and included in the neighbourhood.⁵

The most common time for community opposition is after a site has been selected or announced but before it has been officially approved through planning processes, especially at public hearings. However, community opposition greatly decreases once the development has been built, and there are generally few complaints once residents move in.⁶

What drives community opposition to affordable housing?

Community opposition is not isolated to affordable housing, but affordable housing developments often face an intersection of reasons why community members are opposed, which means that these developments receive more opposition than other projects, and can be difficult to overcome.

Affordable housing developments often face an intersection of reasons why community members are opposed.

In research from Australia, Davison and colleagues highlighted three main community concerns that can impact the response to affordable housing:⁷

1. Potential impacts on the neighbourhood

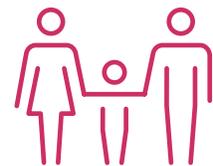
Centred around individuals' sense of place in their neighbourhood, this includes concerns about crime and safety, the integration of the housing development with the surrounding neighbourhood, and the impact on property values.

2. Potential impacts of the tenants

These concerns are centred around classist and racist stereotypes and perceived characteristics about the people who live in affordable housing.

3. Potential impacts of the built form and the planning process

This community concern is centred around the design, maintenance, and location of affordable housing, and often is interrelated with concerns and opposition to urban intensification and increasing density.



How do we respond to community opposition?

Despite the compounding reasons that drive community opposition, research shows that those who oppose new developments can have flexible attitudes which can change over time.⁸ We've highlighted four strategies that housing providers can use to respond to and mitigate community opposition.

1. Educate and inform early

Many community concerns are rooted in myths and stigma about tenants in affordable housing, including concerns about crime, property values, and neighbourhood services. Providing facts and evidence can help counter these myths and stereotypes.⁹

Providing education and information campaigns, both broadly about the benefits of affordable housing and specifically about the development, can mitigate concerns and raise awareness of the need for affordable housing.

Community members are more likely to support developments when provided with early, clear and positive messaging about developments.



The most **effective** way to work through community opposition is through various **strategies** that are contextually and locally specific.

Example: RESEARCH FROM KELOWNA

A University of British Columbia research project with the cooperation of the City of Kelowna tested the effect of 'message framing' on the likelihood of supporting increasing density in respondents' neighbourhoods. The researchers found that positively framing the messaging about the public benefits of increasing housing density resulted in an increase in the likelihood of supporting that type of project, compared to no framing (control group). Messaging about the private (individual) benefits and messaging about social comparisons (what experts said were the views of neighbours) had no statistically significant effect on the likelihood of accepting increasing density.¹⁰

2. Engage early

Engagement is more deliberate and an active decision to listen and communicate with community members. Community engagement guides for municipalities stress listening as one of the most important steps to take to improve community well-being.¹¹

Communities are often concerned that their feedback and opinions will not be taken seriously in the engagement process. Providers and developers should be clear about how community feedback will be used.¹²

Some community concerns are valid and can help improve the development. Community members can provide insight into community history, input on the design, and needed improvements to the area.¹³

Engaging early can allow providers and developers to **establish relationships and build trust with community members.**

Housing providers that intentionally engage early in the process tend to have better outcomes than waiting for negative reactions before engaging.¹⁴

Example: LONDONDERRY MIXED INCOME DEVELOPMENT

Edmonton Londonderry is a mature suburb in the northwest of Edmonton. In 2013, Civida (formerly called Capital Region Housing), Edmonton's largest provider of social and affordable housing, began plans to redevelop an aging social housing site in the neighbourhood. In 2014, the City of Edmonton (the City) and Civida partnered on the redevelopment. The City facilitated community engagement, connected the developer with the community league, and provided staff resources. In this case, the City and Civida piloted a new engagement process where they started community engagement before the formal rezoning and public hearing process to generate early community support. When the project eventually went forward for rezoning, the project was approved with no community opposition, tripling the density from 80 units to 240 units.¹⁵

The Londonderry mixed income development broke ground in 2018 and is scheduled to open in winter 2022.

3. Mobilize community leaders

Developers and housing providers can focus on both minimizing opposition and mobilizing public support to benefit the neighbourhood during and post construction.

This should include **municipal leaders and councillors** who are often some of the first to hear community opposition before and at public hearings and so are well placed to be able to respond to that opposition and build support.

This can also include **identifying potential supporters of affordable housing**, including individuals or groups:

- From the project e.g., contractors, construction workers.
- Who would indirectly benefit e.g., business owners, employers, friends and family of potential residents.
- Who may have a special interest in supporting affordable housing e.g., churches, charities, homelessness advocates.¹⁶



Community leaders can be an important source of public support and **help respond to community opposition.**

Example: RIGHT AT HOME HOUSING SOCIETY, EDMONTON

North Glenora is a wealthy, mature neighbourhood in central Edmonton. In 2015, the local Westmount Presbyterian Church announced a plan to redevelop the aging church building into a mixed-use site with affordable housing townhomes. The church, the developer/provider (Right at Home Housing Society), and the community league came together early to establish working relationships and respond to community concerns. Both the church and the community league were community leaders who helped develop community support so that the building was eventually approved without any community opposition.¹⁷

Overall, this relationship building with the community league created public support for the development which has also helped to keep the aging school open by bringing in more families. Construction began on the North Glenora affordable housing development in June 2016 and the developed opened in 2018. At the time, it was the largest net-zero multi-unit development in Canada.¹⁸

4. Avoid the term NIMBY

Using the term NIMBY fails to closely examine what opponents of new developments do not want in their backyards and does not allow for nuance or discussions of what and why communities are opposed to. This limits how providers and supporters of affordable housing can respond.

It is more effective for housing providers to identify why community members are opposed and develop specific strategies for the concerns being expressed.

Research indicates that the term **NIMBY** has **negative connotations** and is often used as a pejorative and can **increase opposition**.

A more effective response is built on understanding the motives of why community opponents are saying “no”.

Example: VESPA and ENUF

Recognizing that the term NIMBYism can increase opposition, Petrova¹⁹ suggests two alternate terms and methods to identify and respond to community concerns.

The VESPA method (Visual, Environmental, Socioeconomic, and Procedural) guides developers and planners to define and group residents’ assorted concerns into these four categories to better understand their motives and address concerns. Through this process, developers and planners can identify which concerns are the most common and address them specifically to change opposition to acceptance or support.

The ENUF method (Engage, Never use NIMBY, Understand, Facilitate) includes:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 engaging and involving community members in decision-making, 2 avoiding using the term NIMBY as it creates defensiveness and offers an insufficient explanation of residents’ concerns, | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3 working to understand residents’ concerns and perceptions, and 4 facilitating communication to empower communities. |
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Conclusion

While there are some common concerns and some common overarching strategies, every community and development will have unique histories, practices, and local context that will need to be considered when developing site-specific strategies for responding to community opposition and developing community support.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive, meaning that housing providers can and likely should use all of them in different ways. These strategies also need to be adapted by housing providers to fit their situation and the concerns being expressed by community members.

Managing community opposition should not solely fall on the shoulders of housing providers but should involve partnerships with government and civil society to change attitudes towards affordable housing, reduce community opposition, and increase the supply of affordable housing.

Communities can be **moved from opposition to support** but it takes effort and intentionality on the part of the **developer, the municipality, and the community**.

More Information

To find out more about our research on neighbourhoods and affordable housing, please see our full report at civida.ca/AHFacts

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Alberta Real Estate Foundation Community Grant Program to complete this research.

Notice to Readers

Civida has undertaken this research as a part of its research program into social and affordable housing. The greatest care has been taken to confirm the accuracy of the information contained herein. However, no responsibility is accepted by the authors, Civida, or the funders for the accuracy or omission of any statement, opinion, advice, or information in this publication. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of any individual contributor, Civida, or funder.

¹ Tighe, "How Race and Class Stereotyping Shapes Attitudes Toward Affordable Housing"; Tighe and Goetz, "Comment on "Does the Likely Demographics of Affordable Housing Justify NIMBYism?"

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³ Scally and Tighe, "Democracy in Action?"; Goss Gilroy Inc., "Understanding Social Inclusion and NIMBYism in Providing Affordable Housing."

⁴ Whittemore and BenDor, "Reassessing NIMBY."

⁵ Edmonton Social Planning Council, "Public Engagement on Affordable Housing in Edmonton."

⁶ BC Housing, "Overview of Strategies from Case Studies of Supportive Housing Sites in BC"; Tighe, "Public Opinion and Affordable Housing."

⁷ Davison et al., "Understanding and Addressing Community Opposition to Affordable Housing Development."

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¹⁰ Doberstein, Hickey, and Li, "Nudging NIMBY."

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¹³ Edmonton Social Planning Council.

¹⁴ Tighe, "Public Opinion and Affordable Housing."

¹⁵ Anderson-Baron and Kjenner, "Affordable Housing Challenges"; Crowther, "Edmonton's Londonderry Project Is a New Model for Affordable Housing."

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¹⁷ Gregory, "How North Glenora Got to Yimby."

¹⁸ Crowther, "Church Land Redeveloped as Net-Zero Homes for Refugee Families"; Neufeld, "The Community Has Welcomed Us: Innovative Townhome Complex Opens in Northwest Edmonton"; Stolte, "Aging Church Creates Space for 16 Large Immigrant Families in North Glenora."

¹⁹ Petrova, "From NIMBY to Acceptance."