

Understanding Social Inclusion and NIMBYism in Providing Affordable Housing

INTRODUCTION

The “not in my backyard” syndrome, otherwise known as NIMBYism, is a potential challenge for increasing the affordable housing supply through the National Housing Strategy. While a high proportion of citizens may support, in principle, the construction of affordable housing in their city, they are often less willing to support its construction in their own neighbourhoods. Fostering social inclusion in affordable housing projects is an important goal when helping people in greatest need. It reduces barriers that restrict the resources and opportunities for disadvantaged groups and allows for greater participation in society through better access to resources and opportunities, such as employment, services or education.

Opposition to any type of new housing development has been observed in many localities—and opposition appears to be more intense when projects are to provide social housing in particular. Housing providers, particularly serving those in greatest need, often experience the NIMBY syndrome when developing projects. A survey of developers indicated that the vast majority of respondents had experienced consequences as a result of NIMBYism. Most commonly, this included delays in construction. Delays can kill projects if carrying costs and approval costs become too burdensome for the developers.

OVERVIEW

In 2018, CMHC commissioned Goss Gilroy Inc. to conduct a research project to better understand what leads to successful social inclusion in mixed-income housing projects and how NIMBYism is overcome. This research was conducted to better understand the relationship between social inclusion and NIMBYism. It is intended to support housing developers and municipalities by identifying promising practices and strategies for fostering inclusion in mixed-income housing projects and overcoming NIMBY.

The research involved a literature review about social inclusion and NIMBYism in the context of social housing development and case studies of affordable housing projects: The Oaks in Ottawa, Ontario; the Steve Cardiff Tiny Home Community in Whitehorse, Yukon; the Rita Thompson Residence in Ottawa, Ontario; Olivia Skye in Vancouver, British Columbia; the Father O’Leary Seniors Complex in Saint John, New Brunswick; the Mixed-Housing Project in Cité Angus, in Montréal, Quebec; and Full Circle Communities in the United States. Lessons learned identify replicable strategies for housing providers and municipalities to encourage the construction of affordable housing in urban areas.

The “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) syndrome is commonly defined as “a person who objects to the occurrence of something if it will affect him or her or take place in his or her locality” (Collins); or “opposition by nearby residents to a proposed building project, esp. a public one, as being hazardous, unsightly, etc. or a person who opposes such a project” (Webster).

There is currently no gold standard measure of social inclusion, nor is there agreement upon the exact definition and indicators of social inclusion.

Social inclusion

CMHC’s definition, taken from the National Housing Strategy (NHS) glossary, is as follows:

Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society—improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity. It is a situation in which individuals have the resources and opportunities to be involved in society to an extent that is satisfactory to them. Working towards social inclusion means finding and using measures to reduce barriers that restrict the resources and opportunities of disadvantaged groups. Specifically, when building new housing that promotes social inclusion, the United Nations states “housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, access to transit, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas.”

KEY FINDINGS

Behaviours associated with NIMBY attitudes are not necessarily rigid and persistent: they can in fact soften and evolve over time. According to the study, some groups motivated by NIMBY attitudes have gone from antagonistic positions to more strategic and demographic engagement. This can happen when groups engage with other less antagonistic groups.

An **institutionalized action** to oppose social housing may take the form of local government actions that restrict the supply of multi-unit housing. Local governments may impose “regulatory barriers” ranging from direct exclusion of multi-family housing development to indirect exclusion by establishing growth boundaries, enacting strict environmental controls, requiring low-density development and thwarting infill development, imposing excessive fees and delaying proposed projects through the permitting pipeline.

Formal/informal actions are often undertaken in the context of formal planning/consultation activities organized by local governments. For example, legal challenges to support or oppose development are a formal mechanism by which a range of actors (such as citizens or developers) can counter NIMBYism (or development). The informal mechanisms are used to dissipate fears about projects, while demonstrating benefits of projects.

NIMBYism can happen before and after a social housing is built.

Although NIMBYism is not a major threat after the project has been completed, it can be a major threat to future social housing endeavours, if it leads to negative views from the media. It is also important to note that NIMBYism can mobilize citizens and community groups that oppose mixed-income projects. However, projects can also mobilize—and in some cases create—organizations and alliances of local groups that see many advantages to mixed-income housing in their communities, including employers that seek to ensure affordable housing for their own staff. In addition, While there are limited data on the actual effectiveness of these measures, literature does provide best practices for mitigating NIMBYism, including community involvement in planning, engagement strategies, communication strategies, and policies and legal measures supporting accessible housing.

Drawing from case studies, the following strategies were used by housing stakeholders to prevent, manage and overcome NIMBYism and foster social inclusion in affordable housing projects (see Table 1).

Communications and relationship building

- **Early communication about the project** is important for buy-in, as is continued provision of information along the way in order to prevent or mitigate any negative feedback (for example, about construction, etc.)
- **Proactive relationship building** should include outreach to residents and local businesses. Ensuring that management teams are available, in person, to hear residents’ and businesses’ concerns is important.
- **Being present and demonstrating that project proponents wish to find a solution** to the discontent expressed by residents concerned about the changes to their neighbourhood is a sound approach.

Partnerships

- **Collaborations and partnerships** with service providers in instances where these are needed help to ensure that the facilities were supported. Partners offer the forms of expertise required to cover all aspects of the projects.
- **Working with a partner that is part of the construction sector**, who is knowledgeable about the market and the necessary city approvals, is a major success factor.

Evidenced-based approaches

- **Using an evidenced-based approach** helps to gain acceptance for proposed programming.
- **Project leads of mixed-income projects can also gather data from previous projects to show the benefits and actual impacts on their surroundings**, including the limited or positive impacts on surrounding property values. Such data can limit post-NIMBYism and help present fact-based arguments during meetings of project stakeholders at the zoning amendment stage.

Project planning

- **Alignment with a city’s plan to combat housing issues**, such as the City Homelessness Plan in Whitehorse, helped to ensure timely construction of much needed housing.
- Taking time for a meaningful **consultation process** in the Cité Angus project, a complex and lengthy consultation process managed by the Montréal’s Office of Public Consultations allowed all parties to present their views, orally and in writing, in an organized fashion. It led to an independent, third-party recommendation to the councillors and the process was deemed highly successful.



Table 1: Summary Across Case Studies

Projects	Project Type	Receptiveness	Mitigation	Lessons
The Oaks, Ottawa ON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive housing for individuals with complex health needs Low and mid-rise buildings in a residential area 55 units, 30 reserved for MAP participants, 15 for aging at home residents, and 10 for individuals with complex mental health needs Funded through grants and subsidies Managed by Shepherds of Good Hope (NPO) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighbourhood pushback Concerns about crime and population moving in Concerns about decreases in property value Residents felt taken by surprise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Town hall/public information sessions Support from councillor and local police chief Directly addressing concerns Door to door info campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Importance of collaboration and partnerships to “cover all bases” Using evidence-based approach Proactive relationship building Promoting a harmonious community
Steve Cardiff Tiny Home Community, Whitehorse YK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One year of transitional housing for individuals with history of homelessness, substance use issues, incarceration and/or HIV Five micro homes, with one tenant each Loan from social lending organization and donations Owned and managed by Blood Ties (NPO) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some pushback from residents Concerns around public safety and location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public meetings Directly addressing concerns Support from city councillor and mayor Media portrayal Alignment with policy and plans for the city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alignment with the City Homelessness plan reduced potential barriers Support from volunteers in the construction sector helped realize the project Support from a social lending organization allowed for a different route than traditional bank loans
Rita Thompson House, Ottawa ON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing for individuals who are chronically homeless Low rise building with 34 units, in a residential area Funded by the John Howard Society, City of Ottawa, CMHC, and in-kind support through a construction firm Owned and managed by the John Howard Society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little to no pushback from community members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing project management (from pre- to post-construction) Partnerships Forging relationship with community members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with specialized partners Obtaining pay-direct arrangements with governments Managing possibility of NIMBYism both before and after project completion

Projects	Project Type	Receptiveness	Mitigation	Lessons
Olivia Skye, Vancouver BC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed income building (maximum shelter allowance, low end of market, and housing income limits) High rise with 198 units Funded through loans, subsidies and grants Owned by Atira Development society and managed by Atria Property Management Inc. BC Housing purchased 54 units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some pushback from a community association seeking all units to be at the welfare rate Small number of complaints from tenants of a building in close proximity re: their view being blocked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Got ahead of issues by holding an urban design panel Participation in public hearing on rezoning Open houses to show case the commitment to the community and held some at end of the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Success requires building relationships and trust with the community, helped by having a presence as a service provider Use of open houses is crucial Public and private partnerships allow for successful leveraging of resources Relationship with local developer was integral to success
Father O'Leary Seniors Complex, Saint John, NB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed income (market rate and low income), for individuals 55+, with some units reserved for single individuals and women Low-rise building with 46 units Funding via charity, CMHC and government of NB Owned by Columbian Charities Inc., and managed jointly with Housing Alternatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initially well-received Some pushback against affordable housing component Immediate neighbours expressed concern over changes to traffic flow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications strategy Ensuring public officials and decision-makers were available to residents to answer questions Informal community gatherings, that doubled as information sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Important to communicate early about the project Mixed income approach more palatable to lenders Relationship building and taking a solution-oriented approach is key Using success to leverage future projects
Full Circles Communities, United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 60 affordable units for households earning up to 60% of the area median income Situated in a low-density urban area Project proposed after another was cancelled due to strong NIMBY reactions (ongoing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current project faced issues due to rezoning requirements Concerns about public safety and crime Concerns about decreases in property values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempts to accrue vocalized support from community groups and service providers Use of evidence to circumvent speculation Generally limited success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of evidence of success from previous projects is a way to limit NIMBYism and can be used at different stages for the projects Organizing for community support can be framed as beneficial on a number of levels Flexibility in project parameters can contribute to project approvals
Cité Angus, Montreal QC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commercial and residential buildings, which include a mixed income housing component (ongoing) 120 condos, with 70% of units offered at lower than market rates to families Includes a \$10K grant to families for purchase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultations held, where about 1500 residents attended meetings Concerns about high density of project expressed Quality of neighbourhood used as a point of reference for discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced height of building Was recommended by the Office of Public Consultations Councillors approved of project Developer used social media to promote environmental benefits of the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessing and using the appropriate channels for consultation processes can increase chances of project success Being one component of a larger project helped with project approval Environmental friendliness (i.e., LEED) helped with support for the project

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR HOUSING

NIMBYism (“not in my backyard”) is a potential challenge to the implementation of affordable housing projects, specifically for people in need. This research provides insights, in a Canadian context, into how social inclusion and NIMBYism, are defined and how they interact and presents measures and conditions that can overcome NIMBYism and lead to successful affordable housing projects. The tactics and lessons learned can help municipalities, planners, housing providers and policy makers develop strategies to overcome NIMBYism and foster social inclusion. Understanding different mitigation measures and ensuring they are an essential component of their project planning can save housing providers time and money and result in better outcomes for the provider, tenants and the community.

FURTHER READING

Full report – *Understanding Social Inclusion and NIMBYism in Providing Affordable Housing* (https://eppdscrmssa01.blob.core.windows.net/cmhcprodcontainer/sf/project/archive/research_5/rr-understanding_social_inclusion_jan23.pdf)

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