

# Some back-yard arguments are best left home

By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

Governing authorities must contend and work with many special-interest groups in order to plan the growth and development of their communities. Whether these groups are concerned with better schools, garbage pickup, no growth, economic development or the environment, the issues may require action, and often the only way to get the attention of the local council is to band together and confront the authorities with the issue.

There is another type of special-interest group that normally does not initiate actions but rather reacts to proposals that have been made: This group bands together only because the issue affects its members directly. When a facility or housing development is proposed at a certain location, for example, the nearby residents often emerge as the NIMBY group, i.e., "not in my back yard."

The neighbors of the site, i.e., the NIMBY protestors, are having more of a say on matters that were done in an almost perfunctory manner in the past. Today, whether one talks of sewage disposal facilities or group homes, the NIMBY group is bound to turn out to make their views known.

Make no mistake: It is perfectly right and proper for people to make their views known because planners and agencies are not faultless, and we have to live with their errors if they are not called to task and made to justify their proposals. But the end product should be that which benefits the community.

Although the urban setting has a longer history in terms of protesting governmental proposals, the action is now shifting to the suburbs and private developers. It is here that there is land for development, and it is here that there is increasing need for housing construction as these areas continue to grow in numbers of people.

It is in the suburbs also that home ownership rates are highest, and it is here that, according to Robert Wood, we find "man's attempt to be his own unique self; to build his own unique house mid a unique landscape and, in short, to withdraw like a monk and live like a prince." In short, the suburbanite has a major interest here and much to protect.

A major concern of the suburbs today is housing; the type to be built, the costs and for whom. It is all right for you to build next to me as long as it is a detached house that's more expensive than

mine and as long as you look something like me. "And if these conditions are generally not met, then one can expect a sizable turnout of the NIMBY persons when a hearing is held to gain approval of the housing development.

It is in the realm of the attached house, i.e., several dwelling units under one roof, that so much controversy may arise, and this is most unfortunate, for this is generally one way to provide less-expensive housing than comparable detached houses. Further, this type of unit serves the needs of a large market segment, the adult population primarily.

In common parlance, this type of development is called a cluster, and, since open space is involved, the ownership of the complex is shared: it is called a condominium. Now relatively familiar to the Rhode Islander, condos have become part of the landscape. But would you want one next door?

Many communities in the state still do not provide for condos in their zoning regulations, so changes must be made locally if this type housing is to be provided. And when zoning allows such developments, hearings before planning and zoning boards are likely to be lively and controversial, especially from the NIMBY contingent, often because they do not understand the concept.

Usually landscaped nicely and sited to allow broad vistas of open space, the units are normally smaller than detached houses and, as a result, have little room for children. The result is little demand on local schools. Generally self-contained in terms of services, the complex requires few community services, yet provides a hefty contribution to local tax revenues. Of late, this latter characteristic is causing some concern on the part of condo residents because they feel inadequately served by the community.

For any community, a healthy mix of attached and detached houses will provide for the needs of most resident home owners; it would indeed be a loss to a community if a NIMBY group were to prevent the addition of a quality condo complex to the houses already there.

Planning and zoning boards and elected officials must speak for the public good and must recognize for whom the "not in my back yard" group speaks. The result will be affordable and good housing for people who live on the periphery of the city.

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