

Ultra NIMBY – or U-NIMBY

For the past 25 years, virtually anyone who opposed the construction of some kind of major energy facility, such as an oil or gas storage tank, electrical transmission line, power plant, or ‘wind farm’ in their area has been labeled, derisively, as a “NIMBY,” an acronym standing for “Not In My Back Yard.”

Some using the NIMBY term do so in an attempt to discredit project opponents and to avoid dealing with substantive issues raised by the opponents. Thus, “NIMBY” is an *ad hominem* attack on opponents.

Often, the wrong people are labeled as “NIMBYs.” The true NIMBYs are people in metropolitan areas who are the principal beneficiaries of energy facilities but who don’t want those facilities anywhere near them. Perhaps these people should be called Ultra or Urban NIMBYS, or simply UNIMBYS!

In any case, it’s time to shed light on the issue, identify the true NIMBYs, and challenge those who use the epithet in an attempt to avoid dealing with real, substantive issues raised by energy projects.

Citizen objections to certain projects

Citizens have long been concerned about adverse health, safety, noise, environmental, and ecological impacts of energy and other facilities located near them, including projects that impair scenic, property, and other values they consider important. Federal, state and local governments have enacted a variety of measures to protect private property rights and to limit adverse impacts extending beyond property lines. Governments have also exercised powers of eminent domain to permit construction of facilities that government authorities believe have public benefits that should override private property rights.

Origin of the term, NIMBY

According to Wikipedia, the term “... is used pejoratively to describe a new development's opposition by residents in its vicinity. The new project being opposed is generally considered a benefit for many but has negative side-effects on its close surroundings. As a result, residents nearby the immediate location would consider it undesirable and would generally prefer the building to be "elsewhere". The term was coined in the 1980s by British politician Nicholas Ridley...”

Who are the true NIMBYs – or UNIMBYs – when energy facilities are involved?

Objections to the location of energy facilities is not a phenomenon that begins with people living in rural areas or those who wish to protect scenic areas or the value of privately owned property. Instead, objections to the location of energy facilities really begin with people living in urban and suburban (“metropolitan”) areas and organizations located in those areas. People and organizations in these areas account for a majority of the nation’s energy demand. These people and organizations want the convenience of having reliable energy supplies -- electricity, gas or oil -- immediately available for their homes, offices, shopping centers, and cars.

However, they don’t want storage tanks, electric generating units (whether powered by coal, oil, natural gas, nuclear energy, or wind) located anywhere near their homes and offices or impairing their parks or scenic areas or impairing their views or life styles. Also, they want the pipelines and electric transmission and distribution lines needed to bring the energy to their homes and offices to be as nearly invisible as possible – preferably buried underground.

So, while they want the convenience of immediately available energy, they also want any adverse environmental, health or safety impacts kept away and out of their sight! They insist that adverse impacts associated with the facilities should be borne by someone else -- as far away as possible. For example:

- People in California object to power plants in their area, but are quite willing to import electricity generated in Utah or Arizona using coal or nuclear energy. They also want oil and gasoline for their vehicles (even from insecure or hostile nations!) and natural gas for generating plants but do not want any production from oil and gas reserves located off California's coast.
- People in the New York City metropolitan area demand electricity but also want necessary generating plants and transmission lines that serve their needs to be built in upstate or western New York – or even in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia or West Virginia.
- People in New England want adequate and reliable electricity but prefer that it be generated elsewhere, perhaps in Canada, and moved to them over long transmission lines.
- Political leaders are eager to override citizen and local government opposition to electric generating plants, wind farms, and transmission lines but would be aghast if a 400+ foot wind turbine with blades covering an area larger than the length and wingspan of a 747 aircraft was placed on the front lawn of a capitol building or executive mansion in Washington DC or a state capital, or if a transmission line with 125 foot towers were to be placed near *their* private residences.

How should people who object to energy or other facilities respond when developers or others seek to dismiss their objections by labeling them “NIMBYs”?

The short answer is “stand your ground” if you have good reasons to object to the energy facility, and work to obtain fair compensation for adverse impacts, including loss of property value. However, the situation deserves more detailed consideration, including all the following steps:

First, learn the details of the proposed project and its true costs and benefits, both for the owner, the area, and the nation. Many energy facilities are large, intrusive, and costly. They may produce, transport, or store products that are badly needed. But, large energy facilities are intrusive. They may adversely impact health, scenic vistas, environmentally sensitive or protected areas, and the value of neighboring property because of their large size, noise, or other impacts. Such facilities include:

- Transmission lines with towers that may be more than 125 feet tall.
- Large electric generating plants.
- “Wind farms” with wind turbines that are likely to be over 400 feet tall (or 40+ stories).
- Oil, gas, and LNG (liquefied natural gas) storage tanks, and oil refineries.

Second, those objecting to a proposed facility should have a sound, substantive case for objecting to the facility. Those who object to a facility should not be hypocritical by contending that the proposed facility is a fine idea as long as it is in someone else's backyard. Clearly, this undermines their position and often ignores valid, substantive reasons for opposing a proposed facility that is NOT in the public interest. For example, as has now been demonstrated repeatedly, huge wind turbines and “wind farms”:

- Produce very little electricity and that electricity is low in value because it is intermittent, volatile, unreliable, and most likely to be produced when least needed; i.e., at night and in colder months when winds are strong – not on hot weekday late afternoons when electricity demand is high.
- Do not have the environmental, energy, and economic benefits often claimed and, in fact, have significant adverse environmental, economic, scenic and property value impacts.

- Are being built principally because of huge tax breaks and subsidies for “wind farm” owners and financiers, not because of their energy, environmental or economic benefits.
- Are very high in true cost, including the cost of tax breaks and subsidies, and the added cost of providing reliable backup generating capacity needed to maintain grid reliability because of the intermittence, volatility, and unreliability of electricity from wind turbines.
- Do not replace the need for adding reliable generating capacity in areas experiencing grow in peak electricity demand or needing to replace aging generating units.

Third, identify and understand the motives of those promoting construction of the facility, particularly those people using the “NIMBY” label in a derisive way. Expose their identities and motives. Most likely, those promoting construction of the facility will be one or more of the following:

- An Ultra or Urban NIMBY, as described above who wants the convenience of reliable energy but doesn’t want to see the facilities that produce the energy or transport it to his home or office.
- An official from a company that wants to finance, build, and/or own a “wind farm,” transmission line or other large facility that would produce the adverse health, safety, scenic or environmental impact.
- A property owner who wishes to profit by leasing or selling his property to a company that wishes to build the intrusive facility, regardless of the health, safety or environmental impact on neighbors.
- A politician who, for one reason or another, wishes to override citizen and/or local government objections, or is repaying a special interest group or facility developer for campaign contributions.
- A government official or “bureaucrat” with a rather narrow perspective that wants to force a “wind farm,” transmission line, or other obtrusive energy facility into an area that may be ill-suited for it.

Fourth, those who are labeled “NIMBYs” should not be embarrassed and should not “back off” when they are pressured. The health, safety, environmental, scenic, and property values that would be impaired are real and often valuable. The wind industry, for example, has been notorious in claiming falsely that “wind farms” with their huge wind turbines do not adversely affect neighboring property values. That industry and, sadly, some government agencies using taxpayers' money have sponsored “studies” producing such false claims. However, such studies have been shown to be biased and based on faulty analysis. Not long ago, a court in England found in favor of a plaintiff whose life was made unbearable by a neighboring “wind farm” and who could not sell the home because of the “wind farm.” Common sense alone should convince any objective person that a residential property that has a large wind turbine nearby will command a lower price than an identical property without the wind turbine.

Fifth, citizens should not be intimidated by government pronouncements concerning the energy technologies and facilities that should be constructed. Government officials and central planners are notorious for their inability to pick winning technologies. Further, both elected and appointed government officials at all levels have proven highly susceptible to undue influence from lobbyists and developers. Advocates for some energy technologies and projects (e.g., wind energy and “wind farms”) have been extremely effective in creating false popular wisdom and faulty government policies that benefit their private interests but are not in the national and public interest. Billions of taxpayer and consumer dollars have been wasted on the development, demonstration, and deployment of government-selected energy technologies that have proven not to be cost effective, environmentally acceptable, commercially viable, and technologically sound.

What should be done about necessary energy facilities?

Are some of these facilities clearly necessary and in the national and public interest? Certainly they are, but that doesn’t diminish the critical questions: (a) where should they be located, (b) who should bear the adverse environmental, scenic and property value impacts, and the health and safety risks, (c) how should those who are adversely affected be compensated, (d) should eminent domain laws be changed to give

greater protection and/or compensation to those adversely affected, (e) how should people in rural areas be protected, particularly if they are not protected by zoning laws, and/or they have inadequate political representation because legislatures are dominated by representatives from urban areas?

Alternatives should be evaluated. Perhaps, more facilities such as electric generating plants should be located near or IN the heart of metropolitan areas that are being served so that long transmission lines with attendant losses of electricity are not needed. Many cities have blighted areas that could be restored with properly constructed generating plants – perhaps not as large as those plants would be if located at a distance, but still large enough to supply a significant amount of electricity for people in the urban area.

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