



Six Steps to Building Community Support

Community opposition continues to plague proposals for new housing and services for low-income people. While every local opposition conflict is different and there are no ‘silver bullets’ this proactive and collaborative approach that has been successfully used over the last several years to get needed local government approvals.

In a nutshell, the approach consists of six steps:

1. The development team meets early to ***research, assess and plan in five key areas***.
2. Prepare a ***political strategy*** that coordinates all your work towards getting the votes you need.
3. Prepare a ***strategy to build active community support*** for your proposal.
4. Prepare a ***strategy to work through community concerns*** and deal with active opposition.
5. Prepare a strategy to ***protect and use your legal rights***.
6. Prepare a ***public relations/media strategy*** to send your message to decision-makers and the public.

This individual planning approach is like a ‘due diligence’ process in which you consider and make deliberate decisions about five key areas that may be important for every development proposal. Conducting this planning process is not the same as deciding to adopt a high visibility entry with early notification of neighbors. Rather, whether to notify neighbors (and, if so, how and when) is one decision to make in this planning process.

1. Plan meetings to research, assess and plan strategies in five key areas: Schedule two or more meetings of the entire development team together with local advocates and assign responsibility for organizing the meetings (e.g. inviting key people) to a staff member. At first meeting assess the following:

- Your organization’s reputation, capacity to attract broad community support, and its previous experience in dealing with local government, opponents, and the media.
- What local government approvals are required, who will decide, what is the process and criteria for decisions, and an expected timeline.
- Local government’s current knowledge of and support for supportive housing, your organization’s work, and the current proposal.
- Full analysis of the neighborhood surrounding the proposed site (history, problems, assets, etc)
- Likely concerns the neighbors might have, the neighborhood’s experience with similar programs and its potential for organized oppositions.
- Potential legal issues associated with your development proposal, including your and clients’ legal rights.
- The media’s approach to your work and clients.

Make sure your development plan includes at least two meetings to plan how you will get the government approvals you need.

Based on these assessments, at later meetings determine: your strategies toward local government, potential supporters, potential opponents, legal issues and the media (steps 2-5); staffing required to implement your strategies, and any consequences for your proposal's timeline, funding needs, or site selection.

- Each strategy should have a clear plan of action: who will do what, when, how.
- Efforts to implement these five strategies will be going on simultaneously.
- Timing issues are critical and must be decided after consultation with persons most familiar with local politics and the relevant neighborhood.
- Expect to change and improvise your plans as you go along. You won't regret your planning because it will help you manage the process and avoid some fire drills and surprises.

Most importantly, draw on the collective experience of others to gain further insight into the strategies for community acceptance.

2. Prepare a political strategy: Get to know your local government's players and relevant policies. There are 'key leaders' in every community, but they don't always have the same jobs or titles. To find them always ask: "Who else should I talk with about this?"

- Identify solid supporters, committed opponents, and uncertain votes.

If the vote were taken tonight, do you know how would vote for and against your proposal?

- Determine education, advocacy efforts needed to keep supporters, neutralize opponents, win uncertain votes.
- Coordinate your efforts with supporters, concerned community members and the media to get the needed votes.
- Document everything and tell your best story at public hearing. Usually something like: "We're a professional, community-based group with significant community support meeting a critical need, and we've done everything we can to respond reasonably to neighbors legitimate issues."

3. Prepare a strategy to build public support: Active, vocal community support for your proposal will help you get political support, counter your opponents, tell your story to the media and, when appropriate, say hard things that developers usually do not want to hear.

- Develop solid support for the proposal (at least in the broader community) before contacting potential opponents.
- Identify and **prioritize** actual and potential supporters, including tactical allies. Think **widely** about potential allies.
- Plan recruitment of supporters and **what you want them to do** for you.
- Organize **and support your allies** with background information, housing tours and up-to-date information.
- Mobilize supporters at critical points (e.g. using a database and fax sheets) and keep them **informed** and **encouraged**.

Don't spend all your time responding to opponents.

4. Prepare a strategy to deal with community issues: Notification and community outreach decisions should be designed to surface and deal effectively with legitimate concerns and for positive presentation of the proposal, not to create an open forum for opponents to organize themselves against you.

- Consider alternative methods for community outreach (e.g. door-to-door canvassing, open-house forums or small house meetings) instead of the large open community meetings.

Only when you understand why a person opposes, can you select the best response.

- Use an issue based strategy for working through local community concerns.
- Find out the probable basis of their concerns before fashioning a response (e.g. misinformation, fears about impacts, expectation to participate, prejudice, or issues unrelated to your proposal)
- Prepare appropriate responses to each kind of concern (e.g. education, reassurance by trusted authority, appropriate forum for participation, negotiation, clarifying legitimate/illegitimate concerns)
- Peel away layers of opposition to leave only 'unreasonable' opponents.

5. Prepare a legal strategy: Identify your organization's and prospective tenants' legal rights and learn how to spot potential legal violations.

- If your proposal is likely to encounter illegal discrimination or raise complex legal issues, contact legal assistance immediately to learn what you can do to protect your rights, and how and when to get further legal assistance.

Learn to assert your legal rights without litigation.

- Work with legal advocates to protect and assert your legal right without litigation, e.g. educating the city attorney early in the process.
- Keep records of all statements, flyers, etc. that may be evidence of discrimination.

6. Prepare a public relations/media strategy: Decide if you want to generate media coverage (proactive strategy) or if you only want to be able to respond effectively to any media coverage you receive (reactive approach).

- Designate and prepare spokesperson(s) including former clients and supporters.
- Develop your message(s) and alternative stories for your target audiences (e.g. decision-makers)
- Prepare brief, easily-faxable, fact sheets about your organization, the proposal your supporters, your efforts to resolve legitimate community concerns and other information to support your message(s) and alternative stories.
- Invite reporters for a tour of your existing facilities and to meet your staff and clients.

At the very least, select & prepare a spokesperson, your message and some easily faxed information.

- Follow up on any coverage you receive with thank you's and corrections.
- Develop on-going relationships with media (to the degree your resources allow).