



## The Art of Getting Local Government on Your Side

It is difficult to develop affordable/supportive without local government sign-off. First, many lots or properties are not zoned for multi-family housing. This means that developing denser housing will often require zoning approvals for changes in the number of households allowed (density), the number of parking spaces required, and even the type of structure being built (for example if a residential building is being sited in a commercial zone). See [Zoning 101](#) for more info.

Second, state and federal funding applications sometimes require evidence of local support either through a letter of support or through a cash contribution to the project (or most likely, both). In both instances, it is critical to forge a committed base of political support for the project. Getting this support is an under-appreciated art form.

Here are a couple of useful tips:

- ***Bring Town/City Hall into the project early. Find out where you stand before you make a formal request.***

Ideally, local officials should be approached at the outset – even before a site has been identified. (Don't let them find out about your project from an outside source.) Once you have a site in mind, it's wise to review the zoning regulations for your town (often available online) to identify what board approvals, if any, you might need. If it appears that you will need a variance or special permit (see [Zoning 101](#)), it may pay to set up a meeting to get a preliminary sense of where you stand before making a formal request so as to avoid a public compromise.

*Example:* An inexperienced housing authority director wanted to develop housing on a 7-acre parcel that contained some wetlands. He was apprehensive that his site plan would be rejected by the local Wetlands Commission. Using his inexperience as an excuse, he asked for a preliminary meeting to discuss possible solutions *prior* to submitting his plan. He found that Commission members were not only open to giving advice to a novice, but it was easier to craft an acceptable site plan, since the Commission had had a role in shaping it.

- ***Educate officials about the need and the concept of supportive housing so that they become allies in working towards a solution. Make contact with as many public officials as possible.*** Prepare an info packet about the project and distribute it to the Planning/Community Development Department, the Mayor's office, to the City Council/Select Board and to zoning and planning board officials if you anticipate needing approvals. Organize tours of successful similar developments. (See [Nonotuck Case Study](#)).

Err on the side of over-inclusion. You don't want to leave anyone out. Wherever possible, meet with officials one-on-one or in small groups..

- ***See how the project relates to the community's Consolidated Plan (if required).***

The Consolidated Plan is required by HUD of all cities and towns that receive Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and HOME funding and describes a community's needs,

resources, priorities, and proposed activities to be undertaken with certain HUD funding. The Plan, which must include opportunities for resident input and is updated annually, typically describes affordable housing needs and goals.

If the project can be seen as furthering the city/town's stated goals, it may be a useful way to get the support of elected officials, and may strengthen funding prospects.

[Click here for more strategies for working with a Consolidated Plan.](#)

- Cultivate support even if you may not need zoning relief.

*Some affordable/supportive housing developers site their projects on lots that can be developed by right and then keep quiet about the project in hopes that they can minimize public awareness and prevent open opposition. The majority of developers, however, maintain that this "below the radar" approach can be dangerous, and that the risk of angering community members and public officials who feel as if they have been "left out of the loop" is far more harmful than any short-term negative response.*

*Example:* A non-profit developer partnered with a service provider to purchase several multi-family properties. Because the project did not require any rezoning and the board of the social services agency had strong ties with several elected town officials, the decision was made not to connect with town officials or neighborhood stakeholders about the project. The developer had some misgivings about this approach, but deferred to the agency because of its local ties. Upon finding out about the project, the mayor was so irate at being caught unawares that he refused to write a letter of support for a State funding application. In addition, the town attorney found loopholes in the zoning regulations that required the project to be characterized as new construction since the value of the renovations would exceed more than half of the value of the buildings. Under this interpretation of the statutes, new construction was subject to Planning and Zoning Board approval.

- **Remember that political support should never be assumed and needs to be cultivated throughout the project.**

Many projects seem to be initially well received when presented, but vocal opponents and controversy can make politicians nervous. Maintain ongoing communication with both the community and with officials to avoid getting blind-sided by sudden, unexpected and all too common shifts in political winds. NEVER ASSUME THAT POLITICAL SUPPORT = COMMUNITY SUPPORT. (See [Nonotuck Case Study](#)).

- **Don't expect to convince everyone. Focus on the fence-sitters.**

Typically every project has about 20% of the people who support it; another 20% who oppose it; and 60% who are on the fence. The fence-sitters will determine how the project proceeds. If they are leaning towards the project they will hold the line against the opponents who will seek to build their numbers from their ranks. Conversely, once they begin to oppose the project, even prior supporters (like elected officials) may abandon ship.

- **If financially feasible, hire a local attorney with a good local track record if you need to go before the planning, zoning or other municipal board.**

Zoning board decisions can be complicated and political, and failure to get these approvals can shut a project down. It's critical, therefore, to hire a professional who has a track record of working well with Planning and Zoning boards and who knows how each official might influence a decision on a given development.

*Example:* One project needed to go before the Zoning Board of Appeals for a variance. The attorney they hired knew that the Zoning Board and the Planning Board were very competitive, with the latter making nearly all major decisions. Knowing the personalities involved, the attorney decided to emphasize how in this particular situation, the Zoning Board would be in the unique position of making a decision normally within the purview of the Planning Board. (The planning board had granted a special permit for a certain number of units but they could be no more than one story. The ZBA could give a variance for 2 stories.) The variance was granted.

- **Remember that the best way to get political support is to have community support.** Elected officials often feel caught between a rock and a hard place, recognizing the need for a specific project, but fearful of those homeowners, business leaders and other opponents who may be pressuring them to thwart the development. Not surprisingly, swaying elected officials is a function of reaching their constituents. Virtually every issue that involves some discretionary decision-making — even if it has little affect on the surrounding community — will play out in your favor if you can demonstrate that the neighborhood is in favor of your project. This will require:
  - Securing the written endorsement of business leaders, clergy members, civic organizations and other influential stakeholders.
  - Securing the support of other city agencies (such as the police department) or other state elected officials, if possible.
  - Mobilizing your supporters to speak on behalf of your project, both privately and publicly, with the decision makers. Encourage your supporters to attend hearings. Even if they don't speak up, a good show of hands will influence officials and opponents. Present additional letters of support from community members who could not attend.
  - Identifying sympathetic writers and editors at your local newspaper, radio and TV station and seeking a favorable article or editorial. (See [How to use the Media](#) and [Sample Letters to the Editor, Op Eds supporting affordable and Supportive Housing](#))
  - Put a human face to your project.

*Example:* In a situation where a project needed tax abatement, rather than simply present the request to the town council herself, the developer came in with a prospective resident who was a school bus driver. The driver spoke at the public hearing asking the council to approve the request so that he could remain in the town with his family. In another situation where a project needed a change in a bus route, a woman on the project's board with cerebral palsy and some mild cognitive disabilities took a camera with her as she negotiated down to the nearest bus route to demonstrate how unsafe it was for her to negotiate the distance. In both cases, the requests were granted.

- **Invite town officials to attend development meetings.** They may not attend regularly, but having them at the table — make sure they get minutes regularly — will give them a sense of ownership in the project, an empathy for the challenges it may face and a better understanding of the need for funding support. In time, they may be willing to share info about existing or upcoming local and state funding sources. (Planners are often on the receiving end of different types of funding notices). They may also be willing to shepherd the group through potentially complex or intimidating zoning or planning board processes.
- **Develop a good working relationship with the staff.**

Sometimes a developer's first contact will be with the professional staff of the municipal planning and zoning agencies. These staff members are less focused on political considerations and can be very helpful in guiding you through the process – making sure you have the right paperwork, alerting you to deadlines and helping you jump through bureaucratic hurdles.

Think about future projects. Make it a point to invite town council, planning and zoning board members from nearby towns where there may be future developments to all groundbreaking events. The one or two that come out of curiosity often end up chatting with their counterparts from the host town. These peers are often enthusiastic supporters for the project and say things like "I never thought I would become such a strong supporter --- but it's really a great project." Also, if there is someone in the town who is a very vocal supporter, invite him or her to come with you when you start community meetings for new projects in new towns.