

# RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the  
Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*



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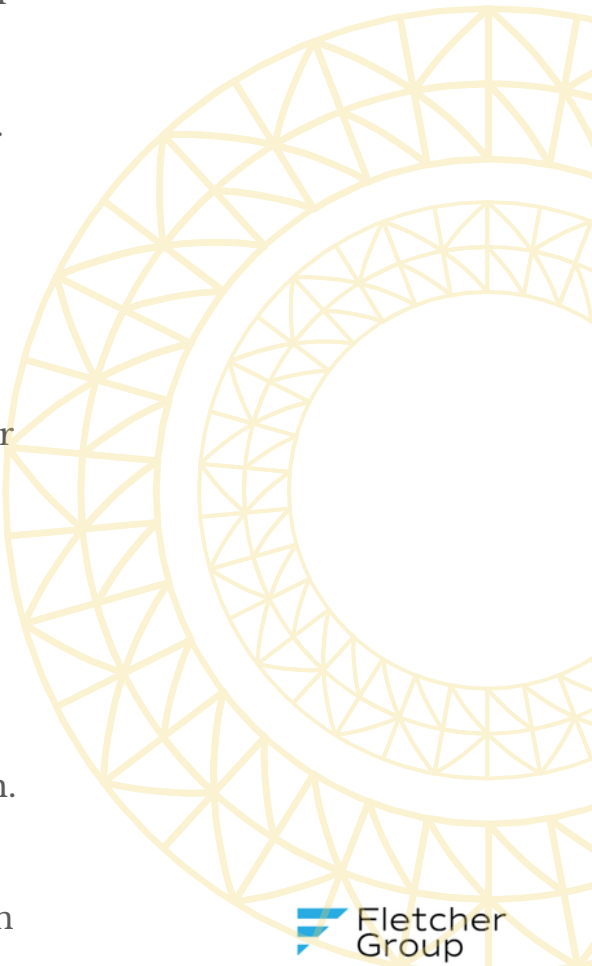
## WHAT IS NIMBYISM?

*by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher*

NIMBY stands for “Not In My Backyard” and NIMBYism typically refers to development opponents fearful of a loss in property value. A common tactic is to portray developers as outsiders profiting at the expense of locals. Personal attacks in the rural areas where we work can be particularly hurtful because everyone knows everyone. In extreme cases, NIMBYism can even go BANANA's, as in “Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything.”

The NIMBYism we most often encounter comes from a belief that new Recovery Residences will bring in or cater to criminal activity. And though fear is not always based on reality and can exploit stigma, activists can present significant challenges to Recovery Housing, causing costly design changes, construction delays, and permit denials.

In our experience, proactive outreach and communication can in many cases overcome NIMBYism. This month's issue of our Newsletter provides "Best Practice" guidance for dealing with NIMBYism and explains how the proper framing of public discussion can enhance your chances of success.



# NIMBY BEST PRACTICES

- **Prepare Early.** Work slowly and carefully, especially at the beginning, building momentum steadily over time. The outcome depends as much on what you do *before* NIMBYism kicks in as it does after.
- **Address Legitimate Concerns.** Respond earnestly to all concerns. Opposition that persists can then be characterized as inappropriate, arbitrary, or capricious.
- **Recruit Allies.** Local knowledge is the key to success so honor and defer to local stakeholders. They're your only way of thoroughly understanding the unique culture, history, and people of the community.
- **Start Now.** Begin as soon as possible to identify and bring onboard the community leaders who can mobilize support. While you're at it, identify potential opponents. Everyone likes being recognized and understood and knowing their values, beliefs and goals can pay off in unexpected ways.
- **Local Leadership.** It's important that well-known and well-trusted leaders be the official "face" of your development in order to prevent allegations that outsiders are manipulating and profiting from locals.
- **Organize.** Enlist your allies to form an official NIMBY Committee. Because they're best equipped to keep the lines of communication open and anticipate local concerns, ask the committee to: 1) Build an argument why the community should support the project, 2) Develop and manage a community engagement strategy that involves locals in the planning process, 3) Identify and enlist community partners to address all concerns raised by residents, and 4) Create and maintain a positive profile in the community.
- **Anticipate.** It's easy to be an armchair quarterback; much harder to anticipate barriers and prepare to meet them. That being said, it's clear that the more prepared you are, the fewer surprises you'll run into later.
- **Showcase Success.** Document positive outcomes with facts and data, but remember that video and in-person testimonials from residents and local officials—police officers, mayors, judges and health officials—are even more powerful.
- **Stress Pubic Safety.** Proactively explain how you'll be a responsible owner and a good neighbor because of the structure provided within the facility and the accountability demanded of residents. Counter accusations of drug dealing, violence, and crime by showing how management will make the facility the least likely place in town to find those things.
- **Communicate.** Identify your key messages, repeat them often, and use a wide range of media to get your message out.
- **Media Relations.** Reporters are not the boogey man people make them out to be. They make mistakes, but it's usually because they're asked to write about topics they're unfamiliar with. Request and help local

journalists write a series of in-depth articles based on interviews with people in recovery. When your project is announced later, readers will be far more likely to endorse it and the reporter will be far less likely to misinform or polarize.

- **Public Meetings.** It's easier for moderators to maintain an environment of mutual respect on Zoom. Public meetings are another story, especially if someone is there to hijack the mic and intimidate participants. Publish clear rules in advance and take steps to ensure they'll be enforced.
- **Take The High Road.** Like recovery itself, the creation of Recovery Housing is a "long game." Though detractors may strike you as irrational, treat them with respect. It can help to know their position as well as they do, even if you don't agree.
- **Remain Hopeful** Being immersed in a NIMBY controversy can be confusing, frustrating, infuriating and depressing. But it's still an opportunity to build awareness, understanding, and support. Living to fight another day is not the worst outcome, especially if you learn from it.



## HOW FRAMING WORKS

According to Cognitive Linguist George Lakoff, ideas, arguments, and even facts cannot be accepted unless they conform to our understanding of how the world works. He calls that understanding a "frame" and asserts that only two frames are available to us: the "Strict Father" frame and the "Nurturing Parent" frame. Each has a completely different way of defining "the rules of life" as well as the meaning of self-interest, responsibility, and success.

In the "Strict Father" frame, we are locked in a dangerous, unending battle between good and evil. We gain our safety, our moral sense of right and wrong, and our identity as "good" by opposing evil. This makes life a zero-sum game of absolutes with the winners and losers easy to spot. Those who are obedient, disciplined and relentlessly self-interested are rewarded with wealth and power. Those who are weak and permissive are punished with poverty and misfortune. Might is right with no exceptions or exemptions.

The "Nurturant Parent" frame is driven by empathy rather than fear. Our self-interest and success are forever intertwined with others. No one is disposable or beyond hope. Poverty and misfortune are a consequence not of moral depravity but of injustice or social determinants that we must work together to overcome for the good of all. In other words, we're not really okay until *all* of us can access the safety, dignity, freedom, fair treatment under law, and essential resources needed to fulfill our potential. This far more expansive view of responsibility requires ongoing sacrifice and teamwork. Care is not enough; we must be effective and transformative.

### No Middle Ground

The "Strict Father" and "Nurturant Parent" frames cannot inhabit the brain at the same time. As one jumps in, the other jumps out. Most of us bounce back and forth unconsciously, making us tolerant on one issue and unforgiving on another. We can also vacillate on a single issue.

### Words As Triggers

The frames are triggered in our brains, says Lakoff, by language—terms and phrases that become familiar to us through repetition. Knowing this, it's in the interest of public opinion leaders to use the trip-wire words that activate the frame most favorable to their cause and avoid repeating the trip-wire words that activate the opposing frame.

How does this play out in our work? To listeners within the "Nurturant Parent" frame, the argument that one approach to recovery is more effective than another is welcomed and valued because, to them, recovery is a real thing. But to those in the "Strict Father" frame, it's not. For them, addiction is a moral choice that can be simply unchosen at any time. Social determinants are just excuses. And decriminalization and treatment do nothing but take away the incentive to stop using. It follows, then, that the RH developer is a con artist who's come to take our money and destroy our way of life. Until the frame changes, all that's heard is the coddling of evil. Prepare to be attacked.

### The Only Option

Argument simply reinforces a frame, so *re-framing* is the only effective option. Some tips on how to do it appear on the following page.



# HOW TO WIN THE FRAME GAME

We hope it never comes to this, but what should you do if angrily attacked by NIMBYs at a public meeting? Rule Number One: Don't play their game. It's natural to think you need to win the argument, but arguing and defending yourself is a trap that can legitimize and amplify stigmatizing claims. Repeating your opponent's talking points and labels (for example, "they're not *criminals*") actually helps trigger the "Strict Father" frame in your audience. And violent discord has the same effect by reinforcing the idea that winning is everything.

It's hard to do while being attacked, but remaining calm and respectful is not surrender. It can actually deprive attackers of what they want. In the Social Media world, it's called "negative social potency"—the joy of harming others. They don't get it if you don't show it.

This doesn't mean you abandon your principles. But it may be wise to pause your presentation and try instead to coax your opponent into the "Nurturant Parent" frame. It's not easy and may not happen, but it's better than engaging and amplifying erroneous information and allegations.

## Have You Ever?

We all like to be asked what we think. Assuming you have the chance, address your opponent respectfully by name and ask sincerely, "Have you ever helped someone in a way that made a difference in their lives and that you are proud of?" Once they start talking, listen carefully and don't interrupt. In answering the question, they enter the "Nurturant Parent" frame where you're far more likely to find common ground.

## Wouldn't It Be Better?

There's one other question that can shift people to the "Nurturing Parent" frame. Example: "I assume, Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, that you support strong family values and that parents should teach their children the difference between right and wrong. Many of the people we help are fathers

and mothers. Wouldn't it be better if those fathers and mothers could stop using drugs, get off the streets, and be at home taking care of their children?"

Another example: "I suspect, Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, that you believe strongly in discipline, responsibility, and accountability. But there's none of that when you live on the streets or couch-surf with others who use drugs. Wouldn't it be better if they were in a structured environment where they have to answer to peers who can't be fooled? Wouldn't that kind of accountability be better than the current permissiveness that expends taxpayer dollars on endless emergency room visits and jail stays?"

## Let It Go

Last but not least, remember that a respectful draw can be a victory. Even if you didn't get what you came for, participants saw that you were professional, principled, polite, and level-headed—someone they know they can work with when the bell sounds for the next round.