

THE NOT-IN-MY-BACKYARD DEBATE

Is NIMBY flak an excuse not to engage?



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The “Not In My Backyard” syndrome, or NIMBYism, has been very much in the news recently.

It has been singled out as the reason for the strong opposition to plans for a variety of facilities and amenities such as a nursing home (Bishan Street 13), a rehabilitation centre (Jalan Batu), an eldercare centre (Woodlands Street 83) and studio apartments for the elderly (Toh Yi Drive).

Are these “oppositionists” merely mindless NIMBY enclaves demonstrating reflexive opposition? Or is attributing such resistance to NIMBYism too simplistic, and an easy way out to dismiss such opposition?

Ordinary citizens should have a say in what happens in their community, for several reasons.

It contributes to active citizenship and a stronger sense of ownership of one’s environment; town Councils

were created in 1988 for that explicit purpose of getting residents involved in their own communities.

And while bureaucrats may know what is needed at a national level, they may lack the ground knowledge of how best to implement national-level initiatives at the precinct level.

CONTESTATION THE NEW NORM

In all four recent events, we see a well-coordinated effort by an apparent vocal minority to challenge and resist the location and construction of the amenities.

In the Jalan Batu case, this has motivated another group (often described as the “silent majority”) to welcome the proposed rehabilitation centre. We should not be surprised by this robust debate in which different groups contest each other based on their competing, and sometimes conflicting, needs.

Indeed, this contestation will probably be the norm going forward. This means that there is an urgent need to develop the rules of engagement lest

However, at the moment, the consultations and dialogues seem very much pro forma and ad hoc. They fuel the common perception that the decision to situate these amenities, even if deferred, will eventually materialise. The authorities need to go further, to explain how decisions are arrived at and the trade-offs with each option.

LEFT OUT IN THE COLD?

As it stands, some local groups feel that they are being made to bear an unequal burden in these national initiatives. It is worth probing into and appreciating the source of their opposition.

We should not be surprised if some of this opposition stems from the feeling that there was a lack of genuine consultation and that their concerns were not addressed.

Such oppositionists are resisting the “done deal” mindset and want to ensure that their rights and interests are accorded due regard. Some of their concerns may be reasonable — for example, who would want more traffic in their area? Their voices should not be ignored, since addressing their concerns will help secure continual buy-in for the decision.

That is why accusing all oppositionists of NIMBYism is too simplistic and convenient, in our view. We should not be too quick to judge or to worry over a supposed moral crisis in our society.

Yes, certainly NIMBYism does exist — given Singaporeans’ patent concern with the market value of their property, their most prized asset. And we should ensure this growing obsession with material value does not crowd out civic values, norms and practices.

these differences of views result in divisiveness and confrontation. Respect, civility and lawfulness will be necessary.

But, it would seem, the dialogue sessions organised to discuss the relevant issues were characterised in some media reports as one group trying to railroad the other group.

While we cannot expect a total meeting of the minds — especially when participants have diametrically opposite start- and end-points — it would be a pity if participants and organisers alike proceeded with closed minds. Then a valuable platform to better understand and address the issues, concerns and fears would be lost — and deeper misgivings of the other party fostered instead.

FALSE FEARS AND STATUS QUO

To be sure, some NIMBYists were vocal and strident, making their presence felt at the dialogue sessions.

These residents are selfishly concerned with how such amenities might be detrimental to their property value

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and their enjoyment of the neighbourhood.

Often, their fears are fuelled by misperception and a lack of understanding of the proposed amenities or how they would fit into the community.

Then, there are the usual stereotypes and mischievous falsehoods perpetuated about such amenities. For instance, we hear of how people mistakenly associate nursing homes with hospices.

Neighbourhood communities also tend to prefer the status quo and be over-protective of their self-interests. But in this process, people may fail to consider the adverse consequences of their opposition, and end up limiting the possibilities for adaptive change to meet the community’s evolving needs.

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BOON, NOT BURDEN

Singapore is rapidly ageing and the need for such amenities will only grow. We will all grow old one day; more of us are also growing old with fewer kin.

We will need to integrate such amenities into our immediate environs. Singaporeans ageing in situ, within the communities where they live, is the way to go — unless, as a society, we have become so callous that we treat the elderly as the ‘new lepers’ who ought to be consigned to the fringes of our urban landscape.

We should endeavour to see such amenities not as alien impositions on a settled community, but as contributing to its larger well-being.

It is crucial for the relevant government agencies to educate Singaporeans on the growing need and importance of facilities such as eldercare centres and studio flats. They should make more thorough efforts to enlighten people about the national plan for the entire spectrum of step-down care facilities and other community resources.

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ARTWORK YEN YOK

However, given the vital nature of the amenities to be built, the genuine engagement of all stakeholders — including NIMBYists — is necessary so that these amenities are seen as a valuable community resource, and that everyone would be worse off without

them. There should be a sustained effort to engage and win over the oppositionists.

How the decision-makers consult and engage is critical. Blaming NIMBYism simply short-circuits the buy-in process.