



Zoning and development decisions have become political battles. Before you begin, develop a winning strategy.

After You Beat Them, Join Them

Don't view permitting as a one-time public relations endeavor. Those old friends may influence new goals as well.

by Christopher Hopkins

The relief of no longer having to deal with irrational neighborhood opponents and their trumped-up arguments can be one of the most satisfying parts of successfully permitting your quarry or plant and opening for business. You'll never have to deal with those meddling troublemakers again.

It's an appealing pipe dream. But sitting back and expecting your vanquished foes to "live and let live" won't cut it.

You may not know it now, but eventually you'll find yourself needing zoning relief or public approvals for change in your operations or an expansion. You might even want to open a new facility in another community miles away.

That's when your old enemies will show up like ghosts, ready to stick it to you. (If they haven't already made themselves a thorn in your side by complaining every time you release a shot or a truck goes up the road.)

Failing to become an active part of the community backfires in unexpected ways. If you are disengaged from the local community, you don't know what harmful stories or attitudes might be circulating — and you'll have no credibility to disarm rumors and misinformation.

Building local relationships and establishing

your business as a good corporate citizen requires a carefully considered strategic plan — and the discipline to carry it out. Sponsoring a youth sports team or donating to a local cause is nice, but taking it a step further distinguishes you from the typically uninvolved contributor.

The benefits are worth the effort if even just a few of those angry citizens who complained about your business are turned into valuable friends whose support for you makes the die-hard look unreasonable.

"Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY) is the dominant attitude towards local development in America. On top of that, a quarry or aggregate facility is the third most-unwanted type of development, with 64 percent of Americans saying they wouldn't want one coming to their community, according to 2007 *The Saint Index* survey on attitudes toward real estate development.

Zoning and development decisions have become political battles. Increasingly, politicians are unwilling to stand up to angry opponents if an applicant does not demonstrate enough local support to give officials the "cover" they need.

Local problems, national implications

Whether you like it or not, your business operates in the Internet Age. With the saturation

of blogs and Web sites such as *YouTube* and *Google*, one misstep or disgruntled neighbor in Huntsville, Ala., becomes fodder for an opposition group in Sacramento, Calif.

But good stories in the media can be used as a positive. A picture of you with a local charity or a story about your community involvement in the New Hampshire's *Manchester Union Leader* can be used to help your case in Tacoma, Wash.

A quick check of the Internet demonstrated how involved O&G Industries, Inc. (O&G) of Torrington, Conn., became involved with its communities throughout the northeast. Director of Permitting Kenneth Faroni believes it should be a part of a comprehensive program while continuing to obtain and maintain permits and approvals in the ever increasing age of "NIMBYism."

"As a responsible corporate citizen, O&G's policy has always been to give back to the community, which provides a home to our various facilities whether it is a quarry, asphalt plant, or ready-mixed concrete plant and this should be an on-going process," Faroni says. "This policy has historically been implemented in many ways, including donating land for various public purposes, a town park for example, or donating materials for a civic-oriented project to name a few."

The Internet can exacerbate a small problem with a single pit in a rural community thousands of miles from where you are currently trying to permit another site. Local opponents to an application in Utah can easily use a story of an incident in New Jersey in their campaign against you. These same opponents can also use unfavorable news coverage about angry residents complaining of cracking foundations, shaking windows, and non-responsiveness.

There will always be accidents and angry neighbors, no matter how hard you try, but the number of these media stories can be reduced greatly by maintaining relationships in each of your communities.

You should begin getting involved before you remove your first bucketful of overburden. Exactly how you go about it depends on the community, but it is always wise to reach out to any groups or neighbors who complain or fought your business approvals.

Establish a formal chain of communication and spokesman, and respond politely and promptly to any complaints. It's better that you hear about problems

rather than the city council or mayor. Even if they don't always like your answer, people tend to appreciate the effort. It's hard to maintain rage at somebody who meets you for a cup of coffee. Neighbors are much less likely to complain when they are informed in advance about what's happening at your quarry or plant.

These relationships contain a long-term value. I have seen the absolutely positive impact when one neighbor travels to another town to testify that he had been vehemently opposed to your application but now, since living near your operation, he is a supporter. That one person's testimony will have more effect on that public hearing than the testimony of you, your attorney, and your expert witnesses combined.

Donate time, not just money

Sponsoring a youth sports team is only one starting point to building community goodwill. Most businesses simply write a check and that is it. But you can, without much effort, expand on this. Have someone from your company coach the team. Set up a tour of your facility and end with a cookout for players and their parents. In a small town with a local paper, you can invite a reporter to write a story about the tour and



In the Internet Age, bad coverage in a single local newspaper can have implications for your sites across the nation.

the cookout as well as take photos that will run in the newspaper. You also get to educate the parents about the benefits of the quarry and the misconceptions of the quarry in a nice, relaxed atmosphere.

This strategy can also work through involvement with the local schools. Target a certain grade to have an annual field trip to tour the facility and offer to be a guest at a science class; it creates the same goodwill. It is again also a relaxed time to inform the teachers and others how much you contribute to the tax base and, thus, the schools (including their salaries).

Many companies sponsor “community volunteer days” through which they give their employees time to volunteer within the community. Some companies let their people do it on their own, while others conduct a group activity. When you conduct a group activity, you create a greater impact and therefore create more goodwill. How about donating the materials and labor to build a large sandbox in a local park? Your company would have access to the materials at a low cost and the labor. You could also name it in memory of a prominent person in the community who has been a children’s advocate, such as a teacher. You could also arrange a ribbon cutting and invite the local parents to bring their children. The newspaper would cover this and the mayor could cut the ribbon. Again, this would give you a lot of goodwill and give you a relaxed opportunity to educate the community about the aggregates industry.

Take the lead in a local charitable cause. Assisting large national charities may be more than worthwhile, but you will gain



Sponsoring a youth baseball team is one way to build goodwill. Coaching it is even better.

far more goodwill by sponsoring a local charitable endeavor because the community can see the direct result of your efforts. Leading the effort will keep your name out front and constantly in the media with a positive connotation.

Take the next step

Just participating in charities and organizing events isn’t enough, however.

It is important that you formally note who is present at each of these efforts as well as who benefits from them. Create a database — these are your future supporters who can be contacted and reminded of your relationship when it is time to demonstrate community support.

You should also send thank you notes to every public official who takes part in anything you do, and use your database

to send out an annual holiday card to remind these people you are there. Each effort, when done correctly, can create goodwill towards your company that you can call upon if necessary in the future.

Another key part of a strategic community involvement plan — an element that for some reason often seems to make our clients squeamish — could be characterized as blowing your own horn.

One thing that I hear a great deal is our clients telling us that they do all these things, but say, “We don’t like to make a big deal out of it.”

Wrong! Make a big deal of it. The mayor and council members look for opportunities to have their names and faces in the local newspaper, whether it’s accepting an oversized check or attending the dedication of a new baseball field.

This will benefit you in two ways. First, you create goodwill around your community. People identify you with generosity and recognize you as being part of their community. By keeping your involvement a secret, it will be easier for those who oppose your future projects or expansions to demonize you. If the general public knows you and considers you a good corporate citizen, attempts to demonize you may very well backfire on them.

Second, the mayor, city councilor, or county commissioner will be less likely to oppose you if they had their picture in the local paper with you at a ribbon cutting or accepting a check or even attending an event at your current operation. They will find it harder to oppose you if you have given them positive publicity over the years.

You should also keep track of the organizations and causes that benefited

from your generosity. When the time comes for you to seek another approval or for someone to stand up for you as a good corporate neighbor, this database is a great place to start in order to identify organization-based supporters.

Be a good neighbor

The absolutely most important action you can take to create goodwill in the community is also the cheapest and the simplest: be responsive. Make sure you promptly answer inquiries from neighbors, even if it is to say that you do not know the answer, but that you will find out. Unanswered phone calls, e-mails, or letters are incredibly frustrating, lead the caller to think the worst about the company, and may lead to complaints that you don't care about the neighborhood being made to governing bodies. You may not be able to satisfy the original complaint, but do not let anyone be able to say that you did not respond.

Your local plant manager is your face in the community, especially in smaller towns and counties. Egos should be put in check while you let your local manager take the credit and be the focus of local newspaper coverage. Regional vice presidents, presidents, and CEOs usually do not work and live in the community where the quarry is located, probably not even in the same state and, in some cases, not even the same country. They are not the face to the neighbors; let your local person develop the goodwill with the community and elected officials.

The benefits from getting involved in the community through a well-conceived program may not materialize for a few years, but it will pay off. Even if you have no plans to expand or construct another quarry anywhere near your local site or elsewhere, it will lead to having fewer complaints made to the county or town and, therefore,

the local officials will have less reason to take them seriously.

There is no magic cure that will eliminate all opponents to a quarry development. We need to understand that the big three reasons people oppose your projects will remain — blasting, dust, and truck traffic. As long as these three components are part of any quarry development, there will be opponents. The key is to make the opponents the unreasonable minority. It will also protect you from some of the frivolous attacks that inevitably will come your way. Residents who know you will defend you.

It's worth the effort. **AM**

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