

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER



PROPERTY REPORT: DEVELOPMENT

## In a neighbourhood near you: NIMBYism

A poll suggests Canadians are torn – they appreciate the mall, but not in their backyard

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Special to The Globe and Mail

May 22, 2007

Anyone planning on creating a commercial or retail real estate development in Canada better get ready for a fight: Canada's theme song is "Not In My Backyard," according to a recent survey.

In fact, not only do 75 per cent of Canadians oppose any new commercial and retail development in their own neighbourhoods but one in five Torontonians and an astonishing one in three Vancouverites says they have actively worked to oppose such projects, Saint Consulting Group Inc. of Hingham, Mass., found.

At the same time, the survey shows Canadians support new single family homes (88 per cent), hospitals (74 per cent), grocery stores (74 per cent) and apartments and condominiums (65 per cent). Among projects they resist most are casinos (83 per cent), Wal-Mart (58 per cent), power plants (57 per cent), large shopping malls (56 per cent) and department stores (51 per cent).

"Canada is well behind the United Kingdom where 83 per cent oppose further development in their neighbourhood but a bit ahead of the United States where the figure is 73 per cent," says Patrick Fox, president of Saint Consulting, which specializes in helping developers get zoning for their projects.

Where Canada differs most from those other two countries, however, is in the reason for opposing new development.

"In the U.S., the chief reason cited was protection of property values [36 per cent], while in the U.K. 15 per cent of respondents cited property values," Mr. Fox says. "In Canada, however, only 7 per cent of people said property values were important. More relevant to them was the effect on the community [20 per cent] and environmental impact [17 per cent]. Frankly, it is an anomaly I can't explain."

The Saint report, the first the company has conducted in Canada where it represents developers in Toronto and London, Ont., also reveals the fundamental paradox of NIMBYism. People do want to shop at big-box stores, "yet, across the country, 58 per cent said they would oppose such developments in their own community," Mr. Fox says.

While Mr. Fox does not offer insights into what motivates Canadians, Bob Finnigan, president of both the Toronto branch of the Urban Development Institute and the Greater Toronto Home Builders Association, says it is simply a natural resistance to change.

"There is a disconnect between public policy and reality," he says. "People know intellectually that we have to have growth, but they don't want to see anything that changes their own neighbourhood or community."

"All we can do as developers and builders is try to operate within the rules and make projects fit more seamlessly into neighbourhoods."

But Mr. Finnigan admits that has not always been the case and some projects have been rammed through with little regard to neighbouring sentiments. "In situations where you have a B site and not an A site, the project economics usually wins out."

Opposition understandably increases in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver where the pace of change is greater and the cities are reshaping themselves with massive infill and intensification projects.

The Saint survey, for example, showed that opposition to retail development, especially new big-box stores, rose to a high of 83 per cent in Toronto, 81 per cent in Calgary and 80 per cent in both Vancouver and Montreal.

Complicating the situation even further is a growing distrust of municipal politicians, who Canadians feel are too closely aligned with real estate developers. About 60 per cent of the 1,223 people surveyed by telephone said there was too strong a link in their communities and 87 per cent said a political candidate's position on growth was an important issue when it came to deciding whom to vote for.

The survey shows that 53 per cent of Canadians would like to see their provincial government given the authority to overturn local planning board decisions.

Mr. Finnigan says builders and developers see a dichotomy in their relations with local politicians every day.

"Politicians tell us privately they support a project because they know it is needed, but they can't publicly come out in favour of it because their constituents wouldn't like it," he says. "The problem is if cities are going to continue to grow, they have to focus on reducing urban sprawl and make better use of inner-city sites. You can't have it both ways."

Opposition to development most often starts with a small handful of people dedicated to resisting all forms of change, Mr. Finnigan says. They begin to circulate flyers and petitions and recruit a groundswell of local residents, who may not even have been aware of the project or concerned about its impact to that date.

"I saw it happen here when the Toronto Transit Commission put through the Sheppard Avenue subway line because I live nearby," he says. "The city wanted to encourage high-rise residential and commercial development along the new line but one day flyers started arriving on my doorstep and pretty soon neighbours all around me were getting involved to oppose some of the developments."