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NIMBY - apt term or a slur?

Controversy boils as residents opposed to projects resent premier's Not In My Backyard accusations

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Before he starts dismissing her as a NIMBY, Arlene Hamilton says Premier Dalton McGuinty should visit her Scarborough neighbourhood and take note of her fuel-efficient car.

It uses one third less gas than the last model she owned. Her neighbours, says Hamilton, are the most ardent recyclers and gardeners she knows.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR
Magda Olszanowski is a co-founder of Toronto's annual Yes In My Backyard Festival, an event by and for members of the city's YIMBY movement.

They're every bit as interested as the premier in the environment, says the area resident, who is nevertheless among the opponents of the province's plan to build wind turbines off the Scarborough Bluffs.

"I do my best to do my bit. I really resent the idea of being called a NIMBY," she said.

Her objection to the wind farm isn't about the obstruction of lakeside views or the potential impact on real estate prices. Hamilton says she's simply not convinced the plan will reduce fossil fuel dependence and could potentially accelerate erosion of the bluffs.

But she believes the acronym for Not In My Backyard is a slur that suggests the wind project opponents are a group of self-interested snobs who believe their property values supersede the greater good.

It's a term both McGuinty, and Ontario Infrastructure Minister George Smitherman used this week to warn that the province won't be stopped from developing green energy projects that are in everyone's best economic and environmental interests.

Toronto-area residents can expect to hear the word NIMBY more as the region's density intensifies and governments push ahead with environmental and transportation projects, including the seven light rail lines in Toronto and GO expansions throughout the region. Inevitably, construction, noise and inconvenience will clash with residents' expectations and comfort.

YIMBYISTS SEEK POSITIVE SOLUTIONS

When is a NIMBY not a NIMBY?

When the NIMBY is actually a YIMBY – Yes In My Backyard.

The YIMBY movement in Toronto is considered a positive antidote to the negative image that stalks many neighbourhood activist and resident groups better known for what they oppose than the ideas they favour.

About 42 groups participated in last year's third annual

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Sometimes it's an apt term.

But sometimes it's tough to sort the NIMBYs from rational opponents to bad ideas, admits Toronto's former chief planner Paul Bedford, who sits on the Metrolinx board. "Many NIMBY folks I have run into seem possessed with their cause regardless of any new facts that surface during the course of the debate. They have a mission and seem to cling to it, and often are not able to seek a consensus position," he said. Opposition tends to be local rather than big-picture, which often leads to inertia, he said.

"This is also why politicians find it very hard to go against their constituents and why in the end not much happens," said Bedford. "It is rare for politicians to grab the bull by the horns and do what may be very tough politically."

Since 1975, when Ontario introduced its planning act, the environmental assessment process has provided the public with reassurances about the projects they fear may affect their health, safety or the environment, says Ryerson University professor Ronald Pushchak, an expert in public participation in urban planning.

Now politicians are arguing there's no time left to stave off environmental and economic disaster.

The result, says Pushchak, is an expedited environmental assessment process for transit projects that will see them pushed through in six months – and soon, a new Green Energy Act that could limit opposition to all sorts of wind, solar and other projects yet to be defined.

"Government needs to earn the trust of its citizens and it doesn't do a good job of that when it accuses them of being NIMBYists, when it hasn't taken the time to address their fears and their perceptions," says Pushchak.

"It's clearly a tactic to make us appear less respectable," says Weston Community Coalition chair Mike Sullivan, whose group objects to the expansion of the Georgetown rail corridor and the proposed air-rail link because of the potential pollution from hundreds of diesel trains running through the neighbourhood every day.

NIMBYISM IN TORONTO

Initiatives where the opposition to a project has been accused of Not In My Backyard-ism:

BIKE LANES

The NIMBY issue: Store owners along Annette St., between Runnymede Rd. and Jane St. complained that adding bike lanes would mean less parking in a business area already short of spaces. Similar battles have been fought elsewhere.

Why it matters: The city's bike plan calls for 1,000 kilometres of bikeways, including 495 kilometres of bike lanes, by 2012. The plan would put all residents within a five-minute ride of the network.

ST. CLAIR STREETCAR

YIMBY Festival at the Gladstone Hotel.

Among them were the Weston Community Coalition, best known for its opposition to the impact of the proposed Georgetown rail expansion to the airport from Union Station, and the Toronto Cyclists Union, which pushes for more street space to be assigned to two-wheeled vehicles.

The YIMBY Festival was the offshoot of community activism around the development plans in the Queen West Triangle, according to the event's producer, Magda Olszanowski, who founded the festival, along with the hotel's president, Christina Zeidler, and the local residents group called Active 18.

"Usually people meet under tense circumstances. We wanted to bring a day of discussion, strategies ... into a positive environment," Olszanowski said.

The fourth annual festival takes place in the fall.

— Tess Kalinowski

The NIMBY issue: Residents were angry when the street was ripped up and construction caused gridlock and dust in the local neighbourhood. Business people complained they lost customers while the line was being built.

Why it matters: Metrolinx plans include the Transit City plan for seven dedicated light rail lines across Toronto, as well as subway extensions into York Region. St. Clair is the third such line, after Spadina Ave. and Queens Quay.

WIND TURBINES

The NIMBY issue: Scarborough residents worry about health and environmental risks from a proposed offshore wind farm, as well as spoiled views and lowered home values. They want more research.

Why it matters: Pushing for green energy, Premier Dalton McGuinty plans to make safety and environmental concerns the only legitimate objections to biofuel plants, solar panel fields and wind turbines.

SMARTCENTRE IN LESLIEVILLE

The NIMBY issue: Locals argue big-box retailers like Walmart would be a scourge on their neighbourhood and draw too much traffic. The city wants the area to host higher-paying creative industries.

Why it matters: Developers played the employment card, saying the centre will create 2,000 full-time jobs. The area's lower-income residents will welcome not having to travel to suburbs to shop inexpensively, say supporters.

GEORGETOWN RAIL EXPANSION

The NIMBY issue: Residents fear the impact of 220 diesel engines whooshing through Weston and Mount Dennis each day, metres from schools and homes.

Why it matters: Metrolinx plans would make it convenient to get downtown from Pearson, and hugely expand GO Transit service to Georgetown and Brampton.