



The rise of the THIMBY

Shannon Bray

Recently I attended a Resource Consent Hearing for a proposed infrastructure project. The applicant set out all the benefits the project would bring, which few people doubted. Then various experts for the applicant outlined how they had assessed the potential effects of the proposal, and how these could be mitigated. The applicant's planner summed up the case by saying that the proposal would be valued, and that the effects would be less than minor.

'Please grant the consent, Commissioner.'

A friend of mine, who had never been to a consent hearing before and isn't confident in public speaking, outlined to the packed room of suited people her concerns about the project. She agreed that the proposal would be of great benefit to a number of people. But she was worried about how the proposal might affect the view from her house, and whether the charm of the area in which she'd chosen to live would be forever changed. She openly wondered whether the proposal was located in the right place.

The Commissioner asked my friend whether she had seen the plans and read all the reports. She said she was overwhelmed by the thickness of the reports and the technical nature of the plans and drawings.

The experts mused. Was this a visual effects issue overlooked? Was it about landscape character, or something else? Or was this just another Not In My Back Yard, thank you very much, submitter number 35?

'We fully support your proposal, but put it somewhere else please.'

As it happens, all my friend really wanted was to talk to someone about what was being proposed, to outline what she was worried about, be listened to, and be reassured that steps were in place to make sure that her concerns were being addressed. She absolutely wasn't opposed to the project, she just wanted to make sure that the place in which she lived was being treated with care.

And why not? We all care about the place we live. Our love for home is deep-rooted not only in our cultures, but in our own ways of life. It is part of our self-definition², an extension of who we are as people.

² Susan Clayton, Environmental Psychologist at the College of Wooster, Ohio



‘Who are you, and where are you from?’

We learn about the place we live in through experiences and storytelling. We attach emotions to the things that surround us. We know when it’s going to rain by the feel of the wind, we tell the time by the shadows on the hill, and fully remember what happened on that little rock behind Mrs Jones’s place back in 1993. The environment around us is our home, familiar to us, our comfort blanket.

So, it’s little wonder that we look out for it. We notice the things that change it, and what might threaten it. We discuss with our family and friends what other people are doing, and whether we like it or not. We love it when they do something that makes our place even better. But it also upsets us when they build something we don’t like – because it changes the connection we have with that place.

‘It’s our back yard too.’

The RMA has no formal requirement to consult on projects. It’s perfectly plausible to rely on your experts, to speak legal, technical language and sing how the benefits of your proposal outweigh any minor effects. What do these non-experts know about effects-based assessments anyway?

But there’s no arguing with someone who speaks from their heart about the place they love. Submitters who say, ‘I’m concerned’ and ‘I’m worried’ can’t be wrong – they’re simply opening up about how they feel. It might not be rational, it might not be based on facts, but it is of concern, and without being given attention the concern can fall victim to strong emotion.

In a recent roading project I was involved in, the Project Manager decided that sausages would be the best way to overcome the potential loss of significant screening vegetation that had been established along people’s boundaries. Over several days, we set up a BBQ and a tent, and invited the neighbours around.

Laughing with a stranger about how many sausages their 12-year-old son can eat in five minutes is a remarkable ice-breaker. Alongside the weather, we talked about the neighbourhood, about families, and about what it’s really like to live next to a motorway. We learned about the problems people were having with the vegetation in terms of shading, and we came to appreciate other challenges we’d not given much consideration to.

Talking to the community made us think.

We adapted the proposal, making subtle changes to some of the key elements. We listened, and we responded. We answered people’s questions about what we thought were silly things, and helped them get an appreciation of why we had to do some of the things the way we were doing them.

Our reward? After full notification (for a motorway stretching through 10km of a medium density residential suburb) we received less than six submissions. And we had positive interactions with people during the construction phase.

I’ve now been involved in a number of projects where we actively seek consultation with stakeholders and the community. We share the proposals, and listen to the concerns people raise. Sometimes we’ll draw up two or three different solutions and test them – ask people why they like one option over another. We involve them in the process, and help them understand the changes the project will make to their place. We give them new stories and new experiences that further enrich their connection to their place.



These interactions help us learn about a place too. It allows us to think smarter about our project and minimise potential problems we might not have even known about. We also eliminate potential issues during the design phase of the project – when they can be better accommodated – rather than trying to adapt designs during consenting.

I call my friend a **THIMBY**.

*'Please do things **Thoughtfully In My Back Yard.**'*

Shannon Bray is a registered landscape architect based in Hawke's Bay. His company, Wayfinder, work with large infrastructure providers around the country, including the New Zealand Transport Agency, Auckland Transport, Spark, Transpower, Meridian Energy and numerous Councils. He describes landscape architecture as 'storytelling the environment around us'.